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Dam resurfaces as hot campaign issue

It was "deja vu all over again" at the Lyle candidates' night forum on Sept. 22. Almost every candidate attending the forum was asked for his or her view on the fate of Condit Dam, which its owner, PacifiCorp, proposes to remove.

Even George Fearing -- the Democratic Party candidate for Congress who is running against incumbent Republican Doc Hastings -- was asked about Condit Dam at the Lyle event.

"I'm against removing any dams currently in place," Fearing said in response to a question from the audience.

Several of the candidates in Lyle did not feel they had enough facts about the status of the dam to offer an opinion on what they thought should happen with it.

Tao Berman, a candidate for State Representative in the 15th Legislative District, said he believes the dam will be coming out soon.

"Condit Dam is going to be removed. The reality is, it's going to be removed in a year or two," the White Salmon Democrat said.

However, Berman said he did not know enough of the details about the proposed removal of the dam to take a stand on the issue.

"I need to understand both sides of an issue before commenting on it," Berman said.

Rex Johnston, an incumbent Republican running for a full four-year term as Klickitat County Commissioner, was less reticent to offer his views.

"I can't understand why you would want to take out something that produces 14 megawatts of power," Johnston said. "But PacifiCorp owns it. What happens to that dam is up to the federal government, it's not up to us. As a county we don't have a say, except about how it's removed, if it is removed."

Johnston added that he -- and the county -- don't want the so-called "blow and go" method, in which a charge would be set to blow a hole at the base of the dam and let the lake behind it and all the accumulated silt drain out and go down the White Salmon River.

"PacifiCorp should be responsible after the dam is destroyed to clean that up," Johnston said. "I say they should do whatever it takes to clean it up. Our concern is how they go about it."

Lea Rachford, the Democrat running for Johnston's seat as Klickitat County Commissioner, said she has no personal opinion regarding whether the dam should come out. She added, however, that she wants to make sure the project is done properly if it is removed.

"I agree with what Rex said. As commissioners, we would need to look at how they remove it," Rachford said. "We have to go with the experts and trust what they say."

Longtime incumbent County Commissioner Ray Thayer, a Republican, said he wanted the dam to remain in place, in part to ensure that the recreational opportunities offered by Northwestern Lake -- the reservoir behind the dam -- remain available.

"It's always been my stance that of course I'd not like to see dam removal," Thayer said. "I always used the lake as a recreational facility. If it has to be taken out, they should dredge the lake, and I don't think they have enough money to do that."

Thayer added that new technologies would not necessarily be able to take the place of the hydro-power energy supplied by the dam.

"Wind turbines don't work all the time. The dam does," Thayer explained.

Thayer's challenger, Jerry Gaines of Bickleton, a Democrat, said he did not feel he knew enough about the Condit Dam issue to take a position one way or another.