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Proposed Eugene fuel transfer facility faces backlash from local group



By Nathan Wilk (KLCC)

Oct. 12, 2024 3:14 p.m.

An energy company wants to transfer fuel from trains to trucks in Eugene's Trainsong neighborhood, but some community members there are concerned about the risk of an environmental disaster.



STREAMING NOW

On Point

Trainsong community members gathered at Lions of Judah Christian Center in the Trainsong neighborhood of Eugene, Ore., on Oct. 7, 2024.

Nathan Wilk / KLCC

1:04 / 1:04

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At the Eugene Clean Fuels Facility, workers would load biofuels from railcars onto an estimated 40 trucks per day. The site would be on railroad property off of Bethel Drive.

USD Clean Fuels, based in Houston, is behind the proposal. In an email to KLCC, a company spokesperson said the facility would help provide renewable fuels to local markets.

But Trainsong residents recently gathered at a local church to express their concerns about the project — including the potential consequences of a train derailment, similar to [the disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, last year](#).

Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of Eugene-based watchdog group [Beyond Toxics](#), told neighbors these biofuels would create a major safety risk if they spilled or ignited.

“They’re extremely hazardous to breathe,” said Arkin. “They’re extremely explosive in the right conditions, and great care has to be taken to deal with these kinds of

Some meeting attendees also said they were worried about noise and disrupted sleep. According to USD Clean Fuels, most truck operations would occur at night, between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.

However, the company told KLCC it doesn't expect to exceed any city noise limits, either on or off site. It also defended the safety of its proposal, arguing it has a 15-year track record of running similar facilities.

“The company is complying with all environmental, health, and safety regulations to minimize the impacts of facility operations,” the USD Clean Fuels spokesperson wrote. “The company is also working with the local fire safety officials to ensure everyone is prepared in the unlikely event of an incident.”



A mock-up of the Eugene Clean Fuels Facility in the Trainsong neighborhood of Eugene.

Courtesy of USD Clean Fuels

City approval

Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis attended the community meeting, alongside City Councilors Greg Evans and Lyndsie Leech. They all said they were concerned about

In June, the city of Eugene approved USD Clean Fuels' zoning verification for the facility. Vinis said she and the city council weren't involved in that decision.

The site is in an unzoned area, so it's intended for "tracks, signals, other operative devices and the movement of rolling stock," according to city land-use laws.

"From the city staff's perspective, the application meets that standard," said Vinis. "And so they approved it, because they didn't have any reason to disapprove it."



Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis speaks to concerned neighbors.

Nathan Wilk / KLCC

However, Beyond Toxics argues the city did a cursory job with its review. Zach Mulholland, a contractor working with the watchdog group, told neighbors the city should require a traffic impact analysis.



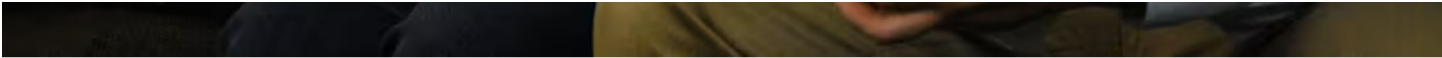
Beyond Toxics has announced it will appeal the city's decision to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals. Arkin declined to disclose the arguments that will be presented in the petition in advance.

In the meantime, Leech told neighbors there's little that the city's elected officials can do to stop the project from moving forward.

"I've been asking every single city staff member, every land-use attorney, every person that I can think of — give me a tool. Give me something," said Leech. "And this process that our community and Beyond Toxics is going through — that is the only tool that seems to be available at this time."

USD Clean Fuels will still need a permit from the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency to proceed. The company plans to open the facility sometime late next year.





From left to right: Dharmika Henschel, Lisa Arkin, Zach Mulholland.

Nathan Wilk / KLCC

Notifying the public

Neighbors at the Oct. 7 meeting also expressed frustration that they weren't notified about the proposal sooner, either by the city or the company.

USD Clean Fuels said it began reaching out to neighbors in August. This was about two months after the zone verification was granted.

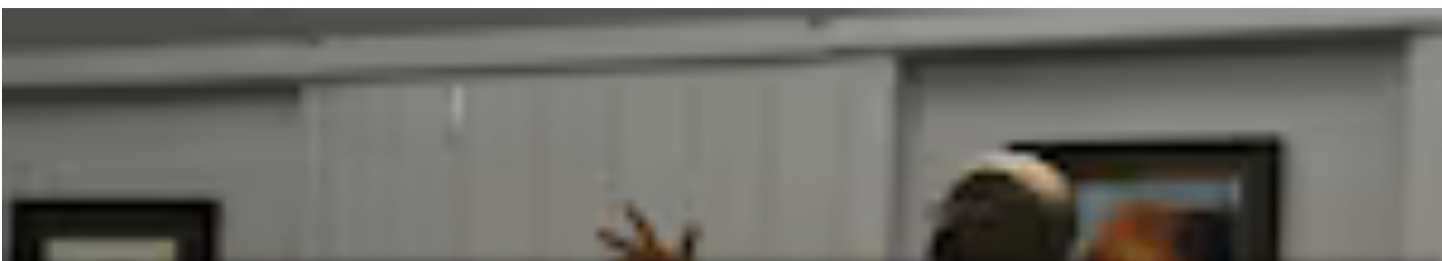
Vinis said the city's elected officials also only became aware of the issue that month. She said since this project doesn't require a zoning change, there's no mechanism that brought it to the city council for review.

"This was a wake up call for me, that something of this significance had happened, it went through a standard procedure with city staff, and we didn't hear about it," said Vinis. "I think there's something for us to look at there in terms of that process."

Changing the rules

Last October, Eugene's city council directed city staff to create new public health development standards, in order to protect neighborhoods from pollution. But one year later, those policies aren't yet ready.

"We have many city councilors who support it, but it has pretty much gone nowhere with the staff," said Arkin. "There's been unnecessary delays, and we should be passing it by the end of the year. Will we get there? I don't know."





Eugene City Councilor Greg Evans speaks at a meeting on Oct. 7, 2024.

Nathan Wilk / KLCC

Vinis said she believes city officials are doing their job. But she said staffing is limited, and there are multiple city priorities splitting employees' time.

“There’s a broader issue here about how many people, and how much time, it actually takes to start a whole new policy discussion, and provide the groundwork for that policy discussion to take place,” said Vinis.

Leech said even if the new standards took effect tomorrow, they wouldn’t block the Eugene Clean Fuels Facility project at this point.

Mulholland told neighbors the changes could help the community prevent a major polluter from setting up in town in the future, similar to the [now-shuttered J.H. Baxter plant](#).

“The current rules are actually not serving us as well as they should,” said Mulholland. “We need to update those rules in order to protect our neighborhoods.”

This story comes to you from the Northwest News Network, a collaboration between public media organizations in Oregon and Washington.