

<http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2009/12/10/polymet-manipulation-and-public-meetingshearings>

## **FREE SPEECH ZONE | PolyMet, manipulation, and public meetings/hearings**

By Alan Muller, Free Speech Zone

December 10, 2009

On December 8, 2009, the Minneapolis the Star-Tribune ran a story entitled:

"DNR leaves out public debate at mining project meetings"

"The format of public meetings this week on a proposed \$600 million copper-nickel mining project in northeastern Minnesota will discourage public discourse, groups say." While most of the criticism has been directed at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the meetings are joint ventures with the US Army Corps of Engineers--St. Paul District. The PolyMet Environmental Impact Statement is a joint state/federal effort intended to meet the requirements of both the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act (state) and the National Environmental Policy Act (federal).

DNR and the Corps are holding two one-night meetings, in Aurora on December 9, and in Blaine on December 10, 2009. PolyMet large numbers of people are expected at the two meetings. (PolyMet is a big deal; among other things it involves grinding up 3.3 million pounds per hour of rock into powder. Air and water pollution would be very significant and probably permanent.)

DNR and the Corps decided not to let members of the public speak publicly. Rather, they hired a bunch of court reporters and plan to have people speak privately and individually to the reporters. A DNR press release calls this an "enhancement." But is it really? DNR spokesperson Colleen Coyne said this meeting format is "new to DNR." Maybe so, but it's not new to agencies and corporations around the US, who have been refining their techniques for creating the appearance of "public involvement" while avoiding the substance of it.

The downside for the public is that people don't get to hear each other, learn from each other, and come together. "It reflects a sales job rather than a sincere attempt to glean public comments in an orderly and balanced way," said Diadra Decker, board member of WaterLegacy, an advocacy group that has raised environmental concerns about the project." (Quoted in the Star-Tribune).

The main reason given is lack of time for the expected number of people to speak after the "open house" and presentations. Why not have as many meetings as necessary to accommodate all speakers? It's not clear that this was seriously considered.

More and more, agencies tend to use consultants to structure meetings to get the results they want. The consultant in this case is Mariann Johnson of MT Johnson Associates of Minneapolis. Ms. Johnson works in the field of "conflict resolution." She didn't want to

discuss details, but said "we proposed a number of options," and the decision was made by senior DNR leadership.

Maybe the clearest explanation came from Corps. project manager Jon Ahlness: "The purpose of the meetings is for the public to give comments to the agencies, not for the public to give comments to each other." Mr. Ahlness said that as far as he knew: "nobody has voiced any complaints" to the Corps.

At the meetings, Polymet will have a table (and posters?). Will Polymet's opponents have an equal opportunity to present their views? Apparently not.

Do YOU want to complain about this?

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