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You can't talk at DNR's forums on mining project

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.

By **TOM MEERSMAN**, Star Tribune

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What good is a public meeting if the public can't speak publicly?

Not good enough for environmental leaders who are protesting the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' plans for handling two information meetings this week about the controversial \$600 million PolyMet copper-nickel mining proposal in northeastern Minnesota.

The meetings were arranged to solicit public comments about the massive project, but there will be no microphones, public debate or open discussion at them.

Instead, the agency will have several stenographers on hand to record opinions individually, said DNR communications director Colleen Coyne.

Environmental leaders said the approach denies people the ability to learn what others think about the project and to question DNR officials directly.

"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.

The mine would be the first of its kind in the state, and its approval would be precedent-setting for other mining companies with leases and similar interests, and for Iron Range communities looking for jobs.

Coyne said that using stenographers instead of having a public forum is a first for the agency, but it was chosen because officials expect hundreds of people at the meetings.

"We feel that using this method we'll be able to hear from more than 300 attendees, as opposed to using the microphone method where we'd hear from 30 to 50 people," she said.

The evening meetings are scheduled for Wednesday in Aurora, Minn., which is near the proposed mine in Hoyt Lakes, and Thursday in Blaine. They will begin at 5 p.m., weather permitting, with a two-hour open house where people can view exhibits and displays and ask one-on-one questions, said Coyne. DNR staff and a consultant will then make a one-hour formal presentation about the draft environmental impact study for the project, she said, followed by another two hours where the public can submit comments.

The DNR is in the final stages of arranging for 10 stenographers, said Coyne. If snowy weather makes travel difficult, she said, the agency has a backup plan of audio and video taping that can be used. The public will also be able to provide written comments at the meetings or afterwards, Coyne said.

The Army Corps of Engineers is also hosting the meetings, as one of the two main regulators for the project .

'Sequestering' the public

Paula Maccabee, an attorney for WaterLegacy, said that recording comments individually amounts to sequestering the public so that they can't hear each other's comments and they can't learn more about the project.

"The agencies have taken both 'public' and 'information' out of the term 'public information meeting,'" Maccabee said.

Matt Norton, an attorney for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, said that it's not clear to him whether the meetings will satisfy federal requirements if there's no public forum.

"Putting people in a room and having the agency talk at them for a time and shuffle them into rooms to make statements on tape is really not a dialogue," he said. "It's a statement and response."

He predicted that the meeting format will hurt the whole effort of educating the public and receiving thoughtful comments. One of the key questions, Norton said, is whether the proposed mine will contaminate waters that flow into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness or tributaries of Lake Superior.

The deadline for written comments is Feb. 6, but environmental groups have called for that to be extended, and for more public meetings around the state in more convenient locations. They are also concerned that the DNR website that's supposed to receive written comments has not been working properly for several days, and people are confused about whether their letters were received.

Coyne said the agency is converting to a new e-mail system and is looking into those problems.