

Proposed Keystone XL pipeline has advocates, detractors

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A load of pipes makes its way toward a proposed Keystone XL pipeline site in Kansas. Photo by Steve Meirowsky.

by Nathan Liewicki

Imagine 40 to 50 double pipeline tractor trailers flying through a small prairie town on a day-to-day basis. For the town of Shaunavon, Sask., it's a reality.

The unusually high truck traffic in the area stems from preparation for construction of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline project. If approved, a portion of the 2,673-km line, would transport oil from Hardisty, Alta. to a pair of sites in southern Texas, passing near Shaunavon.

Located about an hour southwest of Swift Current, the town has experienced tremendous growth in recent months. According to Mayor Sharon Dickie, it's directly linked to the constant truck traffic that continues to pass through.

The Keystone XL pipeline would be the third pipeline to be erected near Shaunavon. Dickie said the other two haven't caused any environmental problems and she has no qualms about the newest proposal.

"From my perspective and from a community that's directly affected by the project, I have no concerns," she remarked. "TransCanada has a stellar safety reputation and the Keystone project is paramount to the economy of the United States and Canada."

In fact, she hopes construction will begin sooner rather than later.

"I think that delaying the decision is delaying desperately-needed jobs in the US and Canada, of course," she said.

The multibillion-dollar expansion would create tens of thousands of jobs in Canada and the United States, but the potential for environmental havoc has others worried.

Randy Fleming is the acting executive director of the Saskatchewan Eco Network, which represents some 75 environmental, ecological and nature groups across the province. He wishes the federal government would have ordered a strategic environmental assessment review to discuss the intricacies of the Keystone XL project.

"I think we really haven't examined the whole dynamics of transporting bitumen coming out of the oil sands and the distance that it's going. Rightly, aquifers and

water sources could be potentially impacted for not years, but decades," Fleming said.

He thinks the economic spinoffs against environmental concerns will always trump environmental concerns. However, should a catastrophic oil spill occur, Fleming feels the impacts could extend through generations.

"You can try to minimize, but you will never be able to mitigate the impacts if an accident does happen," he said.

Yet for people like Dickie and towns like Shaunavon, the economic upside of constructing the Keystone XL pipeline outweighs the environmental effects.

"For a 500-man camp to come into Shaunavon, or be serviced by Shaunavon next summer - and that's the plan - that's huge for our community," Dickie said. "And there's so much more positive to it than there are negatives."