

Protesters Forced Seattle's Arctic Drilling Deal Onto the Port Commission Agenda Yesterday

Enviro

by [Sydney Brownstone](#) • Mar 11, 2015 at 6:00 am



A show of hands, at this Raging Granny's request, of how many people in the room opposed the port's decision to host Shell's Arctic drilling rigs. Alex Garland

More than 150 people packed into an airport conference room on Tuesday where protesters dominated a public comment session on the prospect of [Shell's Arctic drilling fleet](#) staying in Seattle over the next two years. Many wore red, held up signs, and spent a total of three hours **asking five port commissioners to rescind a lease the port signed with Foss Maritime to moor Shell's fleet.**

It's probably safe to say that no port commissioner expected that kind of turnout at a 1 p.m. meeting in an obscure conference room at SeaTac. Much of it probably had to do with an umbrella group of lefty organizations called the **Coalition for Port Accountability**. During their members' public testimony, the Coalition passed a letter to commission staff endorsed by members of Seattle Solidarity Network, 350 Seattle, Greenpeace, Rising Tide Seattle, Plant for the Planet, Jewish Voice for Peace, and **famed environmentalist Bill McKibben** himself.

One port commissioner was not there, however—Courtney Gregoire was flying to Miami on a business trip for Microsoft.

Nevertheless, the Raging Grannies crooned, 14-year-old Plant for the Planet president Aji Piper sang an original song on the ukulele about the port's decision, and University of Washington senior Sarra Tekola, the daughter of an Ethiopian refugee who fled drought, skipped classes to attend.



Sarra Tekola, a UW senior, skipped class in order to be at the meeting. Alex Garland

"Your legacy will not be known for sustainability, but of allowing for the destruction of our planet," she told the port commissioners.

"Shell picked the wrong city to drop a climate bomb on," Tekola continued. "This is not the right city to go forth with something the citizens do not agree with. So you've been warned. Make the right decision, or we'll have to make it for you."

Far fewer labor and industry representatives attended the meeting; their presence was dwarfed by concerned citizens and activists. Jimmy Haun, representing the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters, spoke about the despondence in the construction industry after the Great Recession. "Two members of my local chose to take their lives because they had no hope," he said. The bottom line, he added, is that the lease would provide much-needed jobs for construction workers.

Other speakers decried pitting jobs against the environment, and asked why the port didn't appear to seriously consider alternative job opportunities.

In response, the commission postponed much of what was on the agenda and floated what was mostly a weak alternative. Commissioner Tom Albro read a motion that **would make sure the lease doesn't extend** beyond two years unless the commission says otherwise. Commissioner John Creighton drafted language at the end of that same motion that would **mandate a 30-day public comment period** on leases of "significant public interest."

But the commission didn't vote on the motion—which appears to be a group effort—or even formally introduce it. Instead, the motion is now in limbo, and **will likely make its way onto the agenda for the next meeting**, where it should get a vote.



Protesters packed the airport conference room. Alex Garland

But even if the commenting period measure were to pass, it wouldn't retroactively apply to the deal that has Shell's Arctic drilling rigs headed for the Seattle waterfront soon. **And no one on the commission wanted to consider breaking the lease that's bringing the rigs here**, although the people who showed up at the meeting asked them to do just that. Port CEO Ted Fick said that breaching the contract would incur millions of lost dollars. It could also make the port vulnerable to a possible lawsuit.

"I totally recognize that this [motion] doesn't go as far as some would like," Commissioner Gregoire said when reached by phone during a layover in Chicago. "What I think we're trying to make clear is that **we're taking control over what we can take control of**. This is not a frontier I believe we should be opening, period, and what we need to be saying is this should not be the longterm homeport."

But activists made other suggestions. "If the port commissioners want to prove they don't agree with Arctic Drilling they can **fire the port's CEO and write to the Feds opposing Arctic drilling**," Zarna Joshi, an organizer with Rising Tide Seattle, said. "So far they haven't done either."

Both Gregoire and Bryant are up for reelection at the end of the year. But if commissioners aren't willing to take action, perhaps a court will vacate the lease for them. Environmental groups filed a lawsuit against the port questioning whether its permit for Terminal 5 would allow for activities associated with Shell's Arctic drilling fleet.

Either way, Tuesday's meeting could very well mark the beginning of a new charge in the climate fight. Greenpeace Arctic campaign specialist John Deans said the meeting turnout suggested this issue is the "next Keystone XL." And more than one activist at the meeting warned commissioners that, if it came down to it, they'd be willing to paddle out in a kayak to stop Shell at the port.

One thing's clear: People do, in fact, [give a fuck](#).