

# Homer Board Reverses February Vote for Coal Mine

By Jeff Bossert (WILL/Illinois Public Media)

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Dozens await the Homer Village Board's ruling on a coal mine contract for water services Monday night. (Jeff Bossert/WILL)

A month after trustees in Homer rejected a water contract for a proposed coal mine, trustees have reconsidered and approved the plan with Sunrise Coal on a 4-3 vote.

The vote for selling treated water and sewer services came after 45 minutes of comments from some of the more than 80 audience members.

Most in recent weeks have been from mining opponents, concerned about groundwater and air quality.

But lifelong Homer resident Craig Wakefield said those those complaints are unfounded.

"It seems like a no-brainer to me," he said. "This is something that we're going to live with. Do we want to benefit from that? Or do we want to thumb our noses at a business that's going to be part of our community for many, many years to come."

After voting 'no' on Feb. 11, Trustee Mike Johnson was the only trustee to change his mind Monday, saying he does not want the mine in his backyard, but if the coal mine is coming to the area anyway, the village should benefit.

The meeting also featured about an hour of discussion between board members.

Trustee Kevin Knott said like some residents, he was concerned about the environment and the length of the contract.

"The more I started reading about the environmental effects, there is more to this than just economics in my viewpoint," he said. "You start looking just shortsighted, I mean, '30 years is a long damn time."

There were also heated comments between Knott, and Mayor David Lucas, who had used Facebook and the village website to encourage residents to contact trustees opposed to the project.

Lucas, meanwhile argues Homer needs the revenue from Sunrise, citing a deficit in its water budget.

The village board denied two motions by Trustee Roy Woodmansee to table that vote. One of them would have moved the Sunrise Coal vote to May – after April's elections.

The final 4-3 vote mirrored that of a straw poll in mid-January, when Trustees Ray Cunningham and Larry Mingee and Mayor David Lucas also backed the water sale.

Homer resident Susan Forsyth said her fight against the mine isn't over.

"This is definitely not a done deal," she said. "Nothing about this is inevitable. The mine still has to go through state public comments, so we have a lot more chances to not let this happen."

There was also a legal argument in Monday's meeting, in which Homer Village Attorney Paul Hendren defended the village's ability to re-consider the same agreement as a month ago.

Traci Barkley of the Prairie Rivers Network likens this vote to the public getting a second chance to vote in the same race for president or governor.

"I don't believe this is representative of the public vote," she said. "I really question the validity of this, given that it is the same contract just being voted on by the same six members."

Trustee Knott resigned his seat after the meeting, saying he was fed up. Woodmansee hinted he may do the same.

After Monday night's close vote, Lucas said he doesn't expect the board to consider a separate contract for supplying raw water for the mine.

He also said it's unlikely Sunrise will need to approach the village again until 2014, when mine construction is underway.

In a statement on Tuesday, Sunrise Coal spokeswoman Suzanne Jaworowski said the company is pleased with the Village's decision. She said the partnership with Homer will provide residents with improved water infrastructure, and the ability to keep local water costs low.

"Sunrise Coal is working closely with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and Illinois EPA to ensure that all required state and federal standards are met for water use," Jaworowski said. "The Bulldog Mine project expects to 300 jobs, with an average salary of \$75,000. Additionally, it is estimated that the mine will contribute \$10.9 million in state and local tax dollars. Sunrise Coal looks forward to being a good neighbor in the community."