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Inside City Hall: Residents cast wary eyes on railyard plans

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Proposed railyard expansions on the Westside aren't on track yet, and some people want to see them derailed.

Westside residents, Long Beach City Council members, and air pollution and health experts all seem wary of the proposed projects. Presentations on the railyards and their potential health impacts were given Tuesday at a joint meeting of the council's Environmental Committee and Tidelands and Harbor Committee.

One of the projects would double the capacity of the Intermodal Container Transfer Facility, or ICTF, a railway center operated by Union Pacific railroad located in West Long Beach between the San Diego (405) Freeway and Willow Street.

Just south of there, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway wants to open its own railroad transfer facility, which would be called the Southern California International Gateway.

The ICTF expansion is the most pressing project, with an environmental impact report expected to be released anytime. The ICTF Joint Powers Authority, an entity controlled equally by the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, will decide the fate of the expansion.

Port officials say the new railway capacity will be needed in the future - by 2035, officials estimate - but Westside residents, the South Coast Air Quality Management District and others expressed concern Tuesday about the health impacts from the associated pollution.

The neighborhoods near the ICTF and several freeways in that area are

already known as the "diesel death zone." Studies have shown higher rates of asthma and other illnesses there.

Seventh District Councilman James Johnson reiterated Tuesday that he wants a zero-emissions option to be included in the environmental impact report of the proposed ICTF expansion. That sentiment is supported by Harbor Commissioners Mario Cordero and Thomas Fields, he said.

A zero-emission option would mean expanding the railyard without increasing

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pollution there, but it likely would be costly. The question is: Will representatives of the two ports be willing to force the issue and risk losing railway capacity that they will one day need?

Town hall meeting on plastic bag ban

Should Long Beach ban plastic bags at stores?

That's what the council wants to do, and it's the topic of discussion at a town hall meeting Saturday that 5th District Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske has organized.

The council voted in December to have the city attorney draft a law that would prohibit large stores from providing so-called "single-use" plastic bags to customers beginning Aug. 1. All remaining stores would be prohibited from providing the bags on Jan. 1, 2012.

The Santa Monica City Council approved a similar ban Tuesday, and other cities have taken up the issue.

Several key players in the plastic bag debate will be at the town hall, including representatives of the American Chemistry Council, Heal the Bay, Surfrider Foundation,

Sierra Club and California Grocers.

The town hall will take place at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Long Beach Water Treatment Plant, 2950 Redondo Ave.

Long Beach successes

City Manager Pat West's office released a list Wednesday of the city's accomplishments in 2010.

Despite a struggling economy and budget cuts, West said much was done.

Here are just a few examples from the list:

19.3 miles of streets were repaired.

14.6 miles of sidewalks were repaired.

1.8 million square feet of graffiti were removed from 118,038 sites.

48,000 potholes were filled.

164,000 calls for service were responded to by the Police Department.

59,000 calls for service were responded to by the Fire Department.

On top of that, Long Beach won several

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awards, completed eight park projects and acquired 33.7 acres of Los Cerritos Wetlands.

See the entire list at www.longbeach.gov.

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