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PRESS TELEGRAM

Proposal runs out of power

Latest shipyard plan may be delayed and may not work at all

By Neil Strassman
Staff writer

LONG BEACH – The City Council is expected to postpone making a decision today on a resolution calling for the Long Beach Naval Shipyard to repair nuclear-powered ships, city officials said Monday.

Last week, 3rd District Councilman Doug Drummond proposed the resolution to add nuclear-powered ship repairs to the Long Beach facility, which is the only one of five Navy shipyards that doesn't do such work. He said he hoped the addition might help keep the yard off the 1995 federal base closure list.

But at today's City Council meeting, Drummond is expected to ask for a two-week postponement on the issue to give city officials more time to study the resolution.

In any case, making the Long Beach shipyard capable of repairing nuclear-powered ships may not be the key to its survival because the Navy has been reducing the size of its nuclear-powered fleet.

Bill Gurzi, chairman of the Save Our Shipyard committee, said he asked Drummond to postpone the vote on the resolution until Dec. 13 to give SOS lobbyist Larry Taub a chance to educate the committee and city officials about efforts in Washington, D.C., to keep the yard open.

Further, Assistant City Manager Henry Toboada said his staff needs more time to put together background information for a meaningful resolution.

"Two weeks (postponement) is fine," Drummond said Monday night. "We need good information and need to come together to support the yard."

The number of nuclear-powered vessels in the Navy will continue to be reduced as the entire fleet shrinks to 340 ships or less.

Thirty-four years ago, the Navy commissioned its first nuclear-powered surface ship, the cruiser USS Long Beach, and continued to build nuclear-powered cruisers for nearly two decades.

But in the 1980s, the Navy turned to gas turbines to power its ships and now has no plans to build nuclear-powered surface ships, other than aircraft carriers.

Nuclear-powered submarines have proven so expensive to refuel that the Navy has decommissioned some rela-

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tively new subs rather than face those high costs.

There are 119 nuclear-powered Navy vessels of which 13 are surface ships and the remainder are carriers and submarines. On the West Coast, there are three nuclear-powered cruisers and three carriers, which are ships the Long Beach yard could work on.

"At this time it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the desirability or feasibility of restructuring Long Beach to repair nuclear-powered ships," said Capt. Gordon Peterson, a Washington, D.C., spokesman for Naval Sea Systems, the command that oversees all Navy shipyards.

Peterson said he wouldn't get into discussions of changes to the shipyard, because of the pending base-closure decisions.

The Save Our Shipyard committee has raised the possibility of homeporting an aircraft carrier in Long Beach, but it doesn't favor doing nuclear repairs here.

John Ryan, a spokesman at the Long Beach yard, said the shipyard has no information on the cost or feasibility of either adding nuclear work or homeporting an aircraft carrier here because the current mission of the shipyard is simply to repair and overhaul non-nuclear-powered ships.

"The shipyard is a non-nuclear shipyard," Ryan said, "and we have no information with regard to homeporting a nuclear-powered ship or performing maintenance work on nuclear-powered vessels."

A carrier has a crew of at least 3,000 sailors, said Gurzi, and there's available housing on the former naval station for 1,800 sailors and officers. For crewmen with families, there is a 30 percent rental-property vacancy rate in the Long Beach area.

"They are talking about dredging and building facilities to homeport three carriers in San Diego. Long Beach has excess berthing capacity that could be used at a fraction of the cost to homeport at least one aircraft carrier," said Gurzi.