



Ocean City Council stays course on plan to use properly certified rainforest wood

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Tim Keating, right director of Rainforest Relief, argues with a passerby Thursday evening on the Music Pier. Keating and others were protesting the city's plan to use tropical hardwood. Staff photo by Michael Ein

OCEAN CITY — The city's plans to use tropical hardwood on its Boardwalk dominated public discussion at another council meeting Thursday.

About 30 protesters, nearly all of them from Ocean City or neighboring towns, waved signs outside the Music Pier and shouted, "No rainforest wood!" to passing council members before the meeting.

Ocean City's Boardwalk is second only to the beach as the resort's favorite tourist attraction – and for good reason. This wooden way is home to amusement piers and pizza places, fudge shops and miniature golf, movie theaters and the Music Pier. And all of it boasts a commanding and unsurpassed view of the Atlantic Ocean.

It is only natural that changes to this landmark, a symbol of the city, would generate such controversy.

Inside the Music Pier, protesters continued to press their case that using tropical hardwood is environmentally unsound.

Ocean City is soliciting bids on ipe (pronounced ee-pay), a type of tropical hardwood found in Central and South America. The city's is asking bids for lumber taken by loggers that are certified for their better forestry-management practices by the Forest Stewardship Council.

But the protesters said a rainforest tree is a rainforest tree, regardless of what a bureaucrat certifies about it. They argued that no logging of rainforests is the best option yet.

Upper Township resident Marlowe Boettcher protested the city's last efforts in 1997 to use ipe on its wooden way. That year, Boettcher's family took a cue from the controversy for their Night in Venice boat parade entry, "Boardwalks don't grow in the Rainforest." It was a big hit with the festival-goers, she recalled.

Council at the time reconsidered and passed a resolution urging future councils to look at alternatives before choosing tropical wood.

Ocean City resident Sharon Finlayson urged council to consider the global consequences of its local actions. She is president of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, a nonprofit lobbying group.

The city launched its own counter campaign on Thursday. In letters of support apparently solicited this week by the city, the World Wildlife Fund, the U.S. Green Building Council and Rainforest Alliance heaped praise on the city for pursuing certified wood. Certified wood is less likely to come from illegal logging.

"By choosing FSC-certified wood, you are helping to guarantee that not only are the best forestry practices followed but also that environmental concerns are addressed," Liza Murphy of Rainforest Alliance wrote in a letter dated Thursday that the city distributed to the media.

City Engineer George Savastano recommended certified ipe over splinter-prone pine or newer plastic composites that he deemed not sturdy enough to support vehicles that use the Boardwalk.

Council has not awarded a contract, but a super-majority appeared comfortable with the idea of using tropical hardwood when soliciting the bids this year.

The Ocean City Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Boardwalk Merchants Association endorsed the plan.

Shriver's owner Hank Glaser said he supports council's plan, but he was pleased to see Thursday's protest. "It shows Ocean City has a heart and thinks of the environment," he said.

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