

PROTECTING SOUTH PORTLAND

OUR LITTLE CORNER OF CREATION

By Mary-Jane Ferrier, RSCJ

The Society of the Sacred Heart expresses its mission as “making known the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus Christ.” In recent years, that mission is also expressed through the lens of our commitment to “justice, peace and the integrity of creation.” If only we could put this notion into a “portmanteau word,” one that would emphasize the unity of these three notions all in one word that would speak to the unity of purpose our commitment leads us to.

Since last March, I have been reading and pondering Elizabeth Johnson’s *Ask the Beasts*, a theologian’s dialogue with Darwin’s thought. It has been a deeply moving experience and an enrichment of my own lifelong love of “the beasts,” whose lives speak to me of trusting love. Her discussion leads me to her expansive vision of the Spirit of God dwelling at the heart of creation, “because creation is the self-giving gift of the Creator.” In the light of this, the degradation of the Creator’s gift of self confronts us with the true gravity of our collective actions. As Johnson wrote, “the ongoing destruction of life on Earth by human action, intended or not, has the character of deep moral failure.”

My experience with the Protect South Portland organization has its roots in this world of insights, in this “justice-peace-integrity-of-creation” mission the Society embraces. It is a nuts and bolts story about real people in real world situations. It is an example of what “contemplation in action” can look like.



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The City of South Portland, Maine (pop 25,000), shares a harbor on Casco Bay with Portland. It is the home to the Portland Montreal Pipeline (PPL), a pipeline that carries imported crude from ships to refineries in Montreal. Elsewhere in the great country of Canada, in landlocked Alberta, large deposits of tar sands are buried deep underground.

Petroleum refineries seek a port on the Atlantic or the Pacific, or perhaps on the Gulf of Mexico, to bring tar sands oil to world markets. In recent years, the companies mining the tar sands have been building pipelines to carry them across Canada. As the pipelines have expanded toward eastern Canada, some people have considered reversing the flow in the PPL to bring tar sands oil to South Portland for export to world markets.

In response to the talk of bringing tar sands into Casco Bay, the Natural Resources Council of Maine hosted presentations with graphic pictures and scientific data about the potentially devastating effects of tar sands on our environment. In January 2013, a coalition of environmental groups rallied in bitterly cold weather to march through Portland in opposition to bringing tar sands to our port. The South Portland City Council hosted a workshop at which hundreds of people gathered to speak out against any possible reversing of the PPL. South Portland found

Citizens of South Portland and beyond make their voices heard in objection to tar sands oil in their port.



itself in the unique position of being able to exert its home rule authority to prevent the existing pipeline from being reversed, becoming a conduit for the crude from the Alberta tar sands.

In the shadow of these events Concerned Citizens of South Portland (CCSP), of which I was a member, began meeting to plot a course forward. A member of this group, Natalie West, an attorney with expertise in municipal law, crafted a proposed city ordinance, the Waterfront Protection Ordinance (WPO), that would effectively ban tar sands oil loading in South Portland. CCSP decided to focus on getting a citizen initiative on the ballot for fall of 2013 to make this ordinance law. Within eleven days of active canvassing, the group collected four thousand signatures, well over the 975 required. In August, the City Council voted to send this ordinance to the voters in November 2013. We were off and running!

For this new phase of advocacy, we became a political action committee and changed our name to Protect South Portland (PSP), to capture the more active intent of the group.

That fall, PSP recruited volunteers from the city, from surrounding cities and towns, from colleges, schools, churches, elder groups and individuals who came forward to carry out the myriad little tasks that go into a campaign. They knocked on doors to talk with voters, made countless phone calls, prepared materials, greeted, trained and entered data. In the end, our volunteer list numbered over four thousand. What was clear was that we were working on an issue that spoke to people of all ages. It also became clear to me that *a huge task of education was taking place*. The citizens of South Portland were learning a lot about the dangers of tar sands oil, but they were also tapping in to the threat this oil poses for the beautiful environment in which we live.

It did not take long to realize that we were taking on the petroleum industry, not just a little regional pipeline. A new opposition entity emerged, Energy Citizens, which was traced back to the American Petroleum Institute, the lobbying arm of the oil industry. They spent large sums of money to convince the citizens of South Portland that the Waterfront Protection Ordinance

would shut down the waterfront and make jobs disappear. Eventually, in November 2013, our grassroots campaign was defeated. The WPO lost by 193 votes out of more than 8,000 cast.

It was a disappointment, for sure. But, remember all that education that had been taking place? One group that had paid attention was our City Council, who heard from constituents that they felt they had to vote against the WPO to protect jobs, but they really did not want to see tar sands oil in South Portland. The day after the election, the City Council convened an emergency meeting, at which they proposed a six-month moratorium on all waterfront development and the appointment of a committee to study the issue of bringing tar sands oil to South Portland. Within days, the city received a three-page letter from the American Petroleum Institute threatening to sue the city. Didn't work. When the time came to vote on the proposed moratorium, the council passed it and appointed the Draft Ordinance Committee with a clear mandate to find a legal and defensible way to ban tar sands oil from the city.

The City Council meeting was moved to a larger facility to allow for the large numbers of people interested in the Clear Skies Ordinance.



The Draft Ordinance Committee (DOC) toiled for a little over six months. The process was entirely open, inviting input and broadcast on Community Television. A local columnist described it as a stellar example of democracy in action. Ultimately, the committee came up with an elegantly simple ordinance that bans the loading of crude oil onto tankers in South Portland's harbor, an activity that has never been part of the large petroleum presence here. No jobs would be affected, no businesses shut down. The rationale was based on the right of a city to regulate the quality of its air. Hence the ordinance's name: the Clear Skies Ordinance.

Protect South Portland continued our work. Our focus was on getting the ordinance drafted and approved. We knew our success would make a huge contribution to the work of environmental groups all over the United States and Canada. PSP members attended innumerable council meetings and workshops, speaking out in support of the work of the DOC and countering allegations made in "Energy Citizens" ads. It was my job to rally support from neighboring cities and towns and from professional organizations, like the Maine State Nurses' Association, the American Lung Association, etc. It also fell to me to be the spokesperson whenever someone was needed to comment on new developments.

The initiative passed to the City Council at a workshop in mid-June, 2014. PSP came prepared with hundreds of sky blue t-shirts, making the hall a sea of blue. The council agreed to put the ordinance on the agenda for its next meeting, for the first of the two votes required for passage into law.

Buoyed by this favorable reception, we were unprepared for the events on July 7. When I arrived at City Hall for the council vote that day, there were long lines of men and women blocking the entries. They were all wearing red t-shirts emblazoned with "American Energy." When the doors opened, they surged forward into the chamber to fill the seats. The majority of us in the blue shirts were left milling around. The mayor asked that people there who were not citizens wishing to speak give up their seats and go to another space where they could watch on closed circuit TV. No one budged. Meanwhile, several of our group talked to the people wearing red shirts. It turned out, many of them did

not know why they were there. They had been told to come and just sit and stay. It turned out that this action backfired, stiffening the resolve of the councilors not to bend to outside pressure. They did not take kindly to having their business obstructed like that. One of those councilors told one of us that she was impressed with the peaceful way in which we had handled the situation. In the end, the Council postponed the Clear Skies item to the following week, when they would have an emergency meeting in a larger space.

Ultimately, the council voted 6-1 to send the ordinance to the Planning Board for its input. From that day on my life became one interview after another to get our story out. This was news! We were halfway to the finish line and everyone interested in environmental issues wanted to hear about it.

A week later, the Planning Board registered its approval and

sent the ordinance back to the council for the final vote. A year and a half of planning, strategizing, mobilizing, persuading and doggedly attending meetings was about to come to an end. On July 21, we packed the auditorium again. Long lines formed of people who wanted to speak. The meeting seemed to go on forever as, one after another, people went to the podium, some in wheelchairs or with walkers, some with babes in arms, boys and girls who



Supporters of the Clear Skies Ordinance celebrate their victory.

needed to stand on a chair to get to the mike. It was as if they wanted to bear testimony to something sacred happening.

This city was about to speak up for the earth.

When the vote in favor was announced the auditorium erupted in cheers, hoots, laughter, even some dancing and a lot of hugging. I found myself in tears.

Later, a man introduced himself and said to me: "I hear you are a nun." I replied, "Yes, I belong to the Society of the Sacred Heart." At this he threw back his head and laughed, "You're kidding! I went to your elementary school in California, in Menlo Park." There ensued a long conversation about connections. It turned out that this man had been one of the principal donors to our campaign, through one of the environmental organizations. In some mysterious way he has given back to make it possible for me and my colleagues to participate in that twenty-first century version of the Society's mission. Together, and with his backing, we had done our part to protect the integrity of our little corner of creation. ✦