

NEWS

Mountain top removal, voter ID discussed at Faulk forum

he is neither an advocate, nor is he willing yet to close the door on an intermodal.

Next to come up was the controversial Scenic Vistas Protection Act that would prohibit mining coal by blowing off the tops of mountains over 2000 feet. Janet Drass-Talbot related the story of her childhood home in Pennsylvania in which deep mining practices were replaced by strip mining practices that completely destroyed the surrounding environment. Even after 55 years the landscape has not recovered. She referred to studies that show how mountaintop removal pollutes streams and underground water wells and creates health issues like chronic respiratory and digestive problems that end up costing taxpayers money since the majority of affected populations are poor people who can't afford to move away or pay medical costs. Drass-Talbot also cited statistics about employment in the coal industry as opposed to employment in the tourism industry in Tennessee, which constitutes a huge difference. She said Tennessee tourism brought in \$14.1 billion in revenue in 2009, and the state received \$1 billion in state and local tax revenue from the tourism business, while another study she cited revealed that the coal industry contributed just over \$1 million to the state budget — less than one-tenth of one percent of the state's total revenue in 2009. That benefit was overwhelmed by the costs imposed by the industry, including state subsidies, regulation, road repair and mine reclamation costs. The bottom line was an approximate net economic loss of \$3 million for the people of Tennessee in 2009.

Senator Faulk, as a member of the Senate Energy and Environment Committee, voted against the Scenic Vistas Act, and remained adamant. "My job is not to protect vistas," he said. "My job is to protect water quality!"

Faulk said he was not ashamed of his "no" vote, and said what motivated that vote was that the coal severance tax paid to Claiborne County funded additional school programs and road repair. Fact checking on the state's website showed that all severance taxes in Tennessee equal less than one percent of total state tax collections. With a severance tax that equals \$.75 per ton multiplied by 2010's 1,675,000 tons of coal produced in Tennessee equals \$1,256,250 divided between six coal mining counties — Anderson, Campbell, Claiborne, Cumberland, Fentress and Scott — comes out to less than \$210,000 per county. Compared to Claiborne County's tourism, which in 2006 alone generated \$1.01 million in local county tax revenues, that motivation loses some credibility.

Then Faulk told listeners that studies have shown that when a

previously surface mined area is re-mined, water quality improves. He left it unclear as to whether it improves to its original condition or clears up some degree from the contaminated state that surface mining pollution created in it.

All in all, it did not appear as though Senator Faulk won many friends with his stance on mountaintop removal, especially when he said the proposed arbitrary 2000 foot designation to prevent mountaintop removal was plain "stupid." One gentleman in the audience re-

sponded softly, "It's a start."

Axel Ringe, a member of the executive committee for the Knoxville Chapter of the Sierra Club, handed Senator Faulk a packet of information in hopes that he would read it over, while others vowed to do some research on their own.

There were a few local officials in the audience: David Longmire, Jefferson County Facilities Director, Sheriff Bud McCoig, Roger Griffith 5th District Commissioner, and Bob Beeler 10th District Commissioner.