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Will Sessoms: Offshore drilling would be bad for Virginia

By Will Sessoms
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Will Sessoms, Virginia Beach mayor

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THE VIRGINIA BEACH City Council is steadfast in its opposition to offshore drilling for oil and gas. Before the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, the council had taken a well-reasoned position to support drilling. But the council has since gone from a neutral position to one that, by resolution, actively opposes it.

The policy change resulted from a public and well-thought-out process.

The Virginia Beach City Council's previous position, like that of U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, was based on three criteria: the Department of Defense would not oppose such activity; heightened safety regulations would be adopted; and the commonwealth of Virginia would participate in royalties from oil and gas development, just as the Gulf of Mexico states do now.

However, the Department of Defense has performed a very clear and compelling analysis of the adverse impact to any oil and gas development activities in the vast majority of the area off the coast of Virginia and in the entire mid-Atlantic.

The Trump administration has proposed rolling back the enhanced safety regulations that were implemented after the 2010 disaster. The White House also has proposed negating revenue-sharing with Gulf of Mexico states. These proposals should rule out any expansion to areas on the Atlantic coast.

With the state of Florida's relentless pursuit of moving a nuclear aircraft carrier to Mayport — which is based on, among other things, the degradation of the offshore fleet-training areas off the mid-Atlantic due to the threat of oil and gas development — no responsible entity would advocate supporting drilling. The loss of a carrier could cause a \$1 billion annual hit to the Hampton Roads economy.

Curtailing the enhanced safety regulations for drilling activities proposed for and adopted by the Obama administration would mean that the identified shortcomings in regulations that existed prior to the BP blowout — those that existed before millions of gallons of crude oil devastated the ecology in the Gulf — would go back into effect.

The area off Virginia Beach is the seasonal home to endangered whales, turtles and other species, and the effects

of an oil spill off the coast of Virginia Beach would provide a deadly blow not only to the environment, but also to one of the most important industries in the commonwealth — tourism. Tourism delivers a multi-billion dollar benefit to Virginia Beach, Hampton Roads and Virginia. Recovering from an oil spill that fouls the beaches of our state would diminish this key industry for years, even decades.

The Virginia Beach City Council is united in this posture, and I hope residents of Virginia Beach and all of Hampton Roads would join us, the U.S. senators from Virginia and U.S. Rep. Scott Taylor in opposition to offshore oil and gas development.

Will Sessoms is the mayor of Virginia Beach.

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