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Editorial

Pass a pipeline bill with tougher inspections

Congress must pass pipeline-safety legislation worthy of the memory of three young Bellingham residents who perished last year in the aftermath of an Olympic Pipe Line rupture and explosion.

That was the message from the victims' parents, who rallied House members to reject Senate legislation that lawmakers, Northwest civic leaders and many others found inadequate.

Reps. Jay Inslee, D-Bainbridge Island, and Jack Metcalf, R-Langley, led a gutsy bipartisan effort that argued no legislation was preferable to another flawed measure that deferred to the federal Office of Pipeline Safety (OPS).

The gamble is that improvements can be made before the end of the session, or that a new Congress will be more sympathetic to tougher pipeline standards.

Sen. Patty Murray worked the Senate side of Capitol Hill since the earliest days after the explosion. She did an extraordinary job getting the Senate to look at the issue. The Washington Democrat was eventually joined by Republican Sens. Slade Gorton and John McCain of Arizona. Gorton, this state's senior senator, was a key force securing committee hearings and a vote.

What dogged the Senate legislation was a sense of history repeating itself.

Twenty-two times in the past, following tragic pipeline incidents, Congress has turned to OPS, and nothing happened.

The oil and gas industry has had a tight grip on the legislative process. After Bellingham, House Republican leadership, primarily two Texas representatives, never allowed tougher House bills to come to a vote in committee or on the floor.

A critical component of the House legislation is inspection requirements written into federal law.

Voting against the Senate bill was risky.

Locally, Inslee had the support of the mayors of Kirkland, Redmond and Renton.

Others urging a no vote included the National Sheriffs' Association, whose members are often the first on the scene of a pipeline accident. Besides inspections, the association wants better information on locations and hazards.

So do suburban mayors, and other officials.

House members cast difficult votes in pursuit of better legislation. Congress still has time to provide it.