

Publication: The Denver Post; Date: Aug 5, 2014; Section: Opinion; Page: 17A

The Post Editorials

Oil, gas deal is a break for state

They say nothing concentrates the mind like the prospect of being hanged at dawn. But the prospect of a 24/7 media blitz for the next three months on ballot initiatives to regulate oil and gas drilling might have been a close second.

Alarmed by that prospect, not to mention the possibility that two of the constitutional amendments “posed a significant threat to Colorado’s economy,” Gov. John Hickenlooper on Monday finally brokered what had eluded him for much of the summer: a deal to keep the measures off the ballot while legislative proposals are devised.

It’s a credit to Hickenlooper’s leadership and tenacity that he was able to pull together an alternative to the ballot measures after virtually everyone else had given up on the idea weeks ago.

The deal depends on four initiatives being pulled from the ballot, two backed by Rep. Jared Polis, D-Boulder, and two supported by the oil and gas industry. Assuming that occurs — and sponsors of one of them wouldn’t commit to it when asked by reporters Monday

— the proposal would represent a major victory for moderate common sense.

Drilling regulations have no place in the state constitution and the two Polis-backed measures that so concerned the industry are a blunt instrument that Coloradans had reason to worry about.

If the deal goes forward, the governor and Polis have agreed to a diverse blue-ribbon commission that would propose recommendations for the legislature, a difficult assignment to say the least. If reaching consensus were easy, it would have achieved long ago. But negotiations conducted by the governor’s office early this summer suggest a way: on the one hand, grant greater local control; on the other, offer clear assurances that oil and gas resources can still be accessed.

The stakes are high. If the commission fails to reach agreement on reforms for legislative action, it will set Colorado up for Act II, with similar or more stringent anti-drilling initiatives heading to voters two years from now.

And next time there will be little hope for an 11th-hour reprieve.