

Whittier Hills oil drilling questioned

Daniel F. Duran, Pasadena Star-News, 5-12-10

Duran is an associate professor of business at Whittier College and is one of the founding members of Whittier Hills Oil Watch.

AS a founding member of the group Whittier Hills Oil Watch or WHOW, and as my wife and I live at the last human settlement before entering the proposed Matrix drilling site in the Whittier Hills off Catalina Avenue, we are chock-full of questions about the proposed drilling project.

The project, as currently configured by Matrix and seemingly already a done deal with our City Council, proposes to use horizontal drilling to develop oil sources up to two miles away and under the fabric of our natural preserve and neighborhoods.

If their plan is executed, Matrix will extract oil from as many as 60 or more wells that would initially use 10,000-gallon capacity trucks to transport the oil, to be followed by two new pipelines to be built under our congested streets that would carry the oil and natural gas.

While there are many other significant aspects of this project, this bare-bones overview should be enough to alert the community that this is a big project with a potentially significant, irreversible negative impact on our environment, the safety of our neighborhood, our quality of life and our home and life values.

It's past time to ask the core questions about the oily gorilla that wants to operate in our city. Some of our biggest questions have to do with the capabilities of and the deal structure between Matrix and the city of Whittier. Similarly, we have major concerns with the process to select and monitor the conduct of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that is supposed to be ready for public review by July or sooner.

Specifically, who and what is Matrix and why has the city of Whittier given it an apparently exclusive opportunity to drill for oil on land purchased with public funds and entrusted to the city?

A parallel question that needs to be addressed is what evidence is there to support Matrix's ability to perform an effective, efficient and safe drilling and processing operation? We know precious little about this company and its success working in communities such as Whittier.

WHOW, along with the Friendly Hills Homeowners Association, the Habitat Authority, the East Whittier City School District board and other community-based groups, are asking hard questions.

At the last meeting of the Friendly Hills Homeowners Association, I asked Luis Perez, senior project manager of Marine Research Specialists (MRS), the company conducting the EIR, whether MRS had developed a database of the residents most likely to be impacted and whether it had a plan to interview us and gather firsthand data from us. His answer was "no" and he went on to explain that there was no need nor intent to develop such a roster, nor was there any need to have a direct dialogue with homeowners about the impact of the project on our quality of life. How can you do a credible EIR and refuse to get input from those homeowners and residents likely to be most affected?

WHOW and other groups have been told that we will have ample opportunity to review and comment on the

findings and recommendations after MRS has completed its work, but how "complete" can it be if there is no effort to talk with and gain insights from the people living adjacent to the proposed drilling operation?

As a business instructor, one of the principles of business we teach our students focuses on the need to know your customer and package your product or service so that the customer receives value and his/her expectations are exceeded. Well, as one of many residents who could be dramatically affected by the proposed project, it is unacceptable that we don't qualify to have our concerns and opinions heard.

Mr. Perez readily admitted that the procedures did not require them to have any contact with local residents like me. Along with scores of neighbors in the Mar Vista and Friendly Hills neighborhoods, we will have a clear line of sight to the 300-foot exploratory well that will go up during the first phase of this project, and if the drillings prove out, we will have as our newest neighbor a processing plant that will likely excrete chemicals into the air and soil on a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a week basis.

These concerns appear to be news to our City Council and city staff. It is for us to speak out and make sure that we are not placated with comments that we can wait and see what the EIR comes up with and that we should just trust the company to do the right thing. My trust level is very low, as I suspect is the case with many of us, as this has been neither a very transparent nor interactive dialogue.

We deserve a transparent process that gives us hard information on the capabilities of Matrix and the deal structure it has with the city. We want to provide input to the EIR before the final report is unveiled to the public. We deserve a transparent process instead of an EIR report that is handed to us as a gift, one that was created without our interests at heart.

We demand facts to make sure that we are not bulldozed into accepting another oil drilling project that may benefit some at the great expense of others.