

Saving a California beach town on Election Day

Ted Rhodes, Ventura County Star, 5-31-10

Rhodes, a community activist from Carpinteria, is co-chair of Citizens Committee Against Pardon Initiative, the “No on Measure J” committee.

June 8, voters of Carpinteria will face Measure J, a ballot initiative sponsored by Denver-based oil company Venoco, Inc. If the measure passes, a massive 140-foot-tall onshore oil rig would be erected to facilitate the slant-drilling of up to 35 wells for 20 to 30 years, or possibly forever.

Carpinteria incorporated in 1965 to ensure local governance and oversight, preserving its quaint small-town feel and designation as the “world’s safest beach.” Measure J would critically strip Carpinteria of local control and oversight and, if not defeated, would set a dangerous precedent for every city and town in California.

At first, it appears so democratic: a young man approaches you asking for your signature on a petition to qualify several “people’s initiatives” for the ballot: these petitions will lower your local electrical rates and get rid of all those unsightly oil platforms off our coast in the Santa Barbara Channel.

You sign the man’s petitions, thinking, what’s the harm? Then you notice one of the petitions, in fact, allows a 14-story-high, slant-drilling oil rig to be built onshore right next to a residential neighborhood, a harbor seal sanctuary and a nature preserve.

When you dig deeper, you discover that this isn’t a “people’s initiative,” but one sponsored by an oil company. An initiative that would allow it to bypass all further local review and oversight for a massive oil and gas development project with so many significant environmental impacts already identified that your City Council would likely never approve it.

The oil company’s marketing campaign begins in earnest with its paid out-of-town PR people working the spin: if voters approve this measure, millions of dollars will go to the local school district, royalties will make the city coffers flush, and modern technology has made the oil drilling business “safe.”

The company’s CEO writes personal letters, mass-mailed to every eligible voter. He attempts to marginalize the concerns of your city’s attorney, who believes the initiative is illegal and takes the issue to court; your local City Council, which passes a strong resolution in opposition to the measure; and concerned residents, who have studied the four-inch-thick environmental impact report.

A Superior Court judge, gun-shy of pre-election challenges, allows the ballot measure to go forward but strikes out the provision that would have directed money to the local school district. A grass-roots organization forms to fight the initiative, a group that includes four former mayors, 16 community organizations and more than 1,000 local residents.

Details in the initiative go to the voters: the measure would grant Venoco a carte blanche, open-ended permit allowing the company later to change the scope of its project without further city or voter approval; the measure would exempt the oil company from the laws and practices that apply to everyone else; and whatever royalties

the project might generate would first have to pass through a cash-strapped state and county under a retired bill that has never been implemented.

Further analysis reveals that the “Yes on J” side has only one donor, Venoco Inc., outspending your “No on Measure J” campaign by 10-to-1 in an attempt to convince the town’s 6,000 voters that onshore oil drilling will be safe and beneficial.

You and numerous volunteers walk door-to-door, asking friends and neighbors to “get informed and get involved” before they vote. You hope that you can get to everyone before it’s too late.

June 8, you have to save your town — from slick Big Oil promises and from the misuse of the initiative process.