

# Culver working to settle costly lawsuit against L.A. County

**Leiloni De Gruy, Culver City Wave, 10-27-10**

A 2008 lawsuit filed by Culver City against the County of Los Angeles could be resolved within three to six months, Councilman Scott Malsin said Tuesday in an interview with The Wave.

In initiating the suit, the city has taken on “an incredible financial burden,” Malsin said. The figure, he added, is somewhere in the ballpark of \$1 million. “It is an enormous amount of money.”

With a resolution expected to come soon, Malsin said the city hopes to recoup some or all of its legal costs. The two sides are still hammering out the terms of a potential settlement.

The suit was filed Sept. 28, 2008 after the Board of Supervisors approved a controversial environmental impact report (EIR) and Community Standards District governing land use at the Inglewood Oil Field in Baldwin Hills.

Under the terms of the CSD, partial land owner Plains Exploration & Production Company (PXP) was limited to 24 wells — including newly drilled and the re-drilling of existing wells — for the first year following enactment of the CSD. It allows for the operation of 53 wells annually in subsequent years, 45 of which can be newly-drilled. A maximum of 600 wells can be drilled over a 20-year period, but must undergo a review process.

“The regulations that the oil fields have operated under for many decades are really out-of-date,” Malsin said, referring to the 80 years PXP operated without community oversight or an EIR. “We felt that if the drilling was going to increase in the area, it was time to bring them up to modern standards.”

While the city agreed with a number of provisions in the EIR, local officials did not believe it included adequate health and safety protections for nearby residents. Residents in Culver City and neighboring communities such as Baldwin Hills, Baldwin Vista, Ladera Heights, Inglewood, View Park and Windsor Hills, have long complained about the environmental effects of the two-square-mile oil field, where about 400 active drills were operating in 2008.

As an example, officials pointed to a 2006 gas leak that forced residents of the Culver Crest area to evacuate their homes.

“They felt like they were going to die,” Malsin said. “They were choking in their homes.”

Other concerns have involved air pollution, noise, soil contamination and perceived health risks — such as cancer and upper respiratory problems — that could result from the drilling.

“Our biggest concern in our neighborhood are many issues, but the two principal issues relate to community health. We have a lot of children with asthma, and we’ve had a number of deaths related to cancer,” Baldwin Vista homeowner Irma Munoz said in a 2009 interview with The Wave. “The second point is that many of the homes, including [my] own home, has suffered from falling hills and soil deteriorating and we think it’s connected to some of the oil that is being pulled out and the water that is being injected in.”

Water injection is a method by which water is injected into a reservoir. By increasing pressure, oil is swept up or displaced from the reservoir and pushed toward a well, where it is then extracted.

The process became a recent issue when Culver City Dog Park was closed Sept. 28 of this year after city officials received a call about water seeping from the ground. According to Culver City Director of Public Works Charles Herbertson, the problem was found to be a leaking oil well that was abandoned in 1972 by an Atlanta-based oil company. Air samples also indicated that there were low levels of methane gas at the site.

After further investigation, however, “the State Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR) did testing and determined that the water coming up from that long abandoned well at the dog park was from the current operations of PXP,” Malsin said.

Also in the suit, the city claimed that there was not enough time given to make arguments against approving the land use documents and the environmental review.

When the CSD was adopted by the county, under the direction of then Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, there was not much of an option. In June 2008, a moratorium that halted new drilling had expired. Without the CSD in place, PXP could have drilled 1,000 new wells.