

Oil pipeline wins county approval

Morgan Hoover, Santa Barbara News-Press, 8-4-11

The Santa Barbara County Planning Commission gave the go-ahead Wednesday to Venoco's Ellwood Pipeline Line 96 project.

The project will replace all barging activity at the Ellwood Marine Terminal, carrying oil onshore to the Plains pipeline, where it would be transported to refineries.

Despite concerns from the public over the project in the past few months, the commission approved a development plan, a major conditional use permit, a coastal development permit and certification of the environmental impact report.

"We understand this is the environmentally superior project," said 3rd District Commissioner Marell Brooks.

Second District Commissioner Cecilia Brown agreed.

"The community in the city is very happy about this project," she said. "I'm in total support of this project."

First District Commissioner Michael Cooney said the project "is improving the environment."

Early in the meeting, the commission accepted an 18-page letter from the city of Goleta, where much of the pipeline will lie, seeking clarification of a handful of items in the project's final environmental impact report.

"There were extenuating circumstances," apologized Joanna Smith, Goleta's assistant city attorney, of the late notice. "These clarifications are specific to the city."

One of the major changes sought in the letter is to change a sentence in the EIR from, "Therefore, impacts from the proposed project on publicly-provided fire protection and emergency response services would be considered significant," to a sentence that identifies those impacts as "less than significant."

The reason for the change, according to the letter from Goleta, is that "the majority of the new pipeline will be routed within existing roads right-of-way, which is an existing Gas Company pipeline corridor. Therefore, fire protection services are already being provided for by the Gas Company pipeline in the same location proposed for the new pipeline."

The commission agreed with Environmental Defense Center Chief Counsel Linda Krop, who asked that the project include a condition preventing trenching in flowing drainages.

Ms. Krop was in favor of the project otherwise.

The EIR listed several significant impacts, most associated with the possibility of a crude oil spill.

Fourteen environmental issue areas, including hazardous materials, air quality, transportation and circulation, noise, aesthetics and agriculture are considered in the report.

The report includes measures to offset impacts in each of these areas. One potential risk is damage to the

pipeline from seismic activity along the More Ranch Fault, which could result in an oil leak.

Though the potential for a leak cannot be eliminated, the risk would be mitigated by seismic evaluation and design, safety plans, a leak detection system and remote block valves to stop oil flow and prevent contamination.

Venoco would also pay a fee to the Santa Barbara County Fire Department for the eventual construction of a new fire station for fire protection and emergency response along the pipeline route in case of a spill.

Other significant impacts include noise, air quality and traffic disruptions from construction. Mitigation for each is discussed in the report.

Venoco's government relations specialist Steve Greig told the commission that the project is small -- using only a six-inch pipe -- and worth its impacts, of which the EIR projects five that are considered Class I, which means they are significant and unavoidable.

"There will be no more barging operations in Santa Barbara County," he said. "Doing nothing has twice the number of Class I impacts."

Pipeline construction is anticipated to move forward at 300 feet per day for four months using 90 to 110 workers.

According to county planning staff, work will likely start Oct. 1.

For more information, go to www.countyofsb.org.