

Anti-oil La Habra Heights group submits initiative to ban additional drilling, fracking

Mike Sprague, Whittier Daily News. 10-1-14

LA HABRA HEIGHTS -- Members of oil opposition group Heights Oil Watch on Monday filed an initiative that would prohibit drilling of new wells for oil and gas, the reactivation of old wells, and create a ban on fracking.

Mike Hughes, the group's president, said the measure is aimed at stopping Matrix Oil Company's plan to drill for oil on an 18-acre parcel owned by Southern California Gas Company at 2490 Las Palomas Drive.

"We're hoping that it makes them think a couple of times as to whether it's really that feasible to start drilling out here," Hughes said.

"We want to retain our rural environment, keep the public safe from trucks and keep our air quality as it is now," he said.

Mike McCaskey, executive vice president for Matrix, said he still needs to finish reviewing the measure, but predicted there would be "legal consequences" for it.

"These types of initiatives deny rights to property owners," McCaskey said.

"I do know you can't terminate the rights of mineral owners without things happening. Our project is zoned for this activity. The property owner is expecting a reasonable review and analysis. They're expecting the project to move forward."

Still, Matrix will just observe the process and not get involved, he said. "We will either respond to questions about it or help to identify what our project is," McCaskey said. "We can't get in the middle of this. This is something for the voters to decide if it gets enough signatures.

Council members said they also haven't yet had a chance to read the full measure.

"Right now, it's been sent off to our attorney to review," Mayor Brian Bergman said. "We'll have to look at it and have discussions on it."

Heights Oil Watch members won't be able to start collecting signatures for a while. Interim City Attorney John Brown must prepare a title and ballot summary and he expects that to be completed next week. Then, Heights Oil Watch must post notices in the city and local newspapers before they can get started.

While the group has 180 days to collect signatures, Hughes said the goal is to put the measure on the March 3 City Council election ballot. To do that, the group needs to submit signatures by the end of October, City Manager Shauna Clark said.

If Heights Oil Watch can't get the measure on the March 3 ballot, the number of signatures they collect will determine when it would go to the voters.

Heights Oil Watch could collect signatures of as little 10 percent of the voters — an estimated 377 — but the city could wait until its next council election before putting it on the ballot.

If the group gets 15 percent or an estimated 565 signatures, the council would have to call a special election.

The measure would amend the city's general plan and municipal code.

It would prohibit high-intensity oil drilling, such as the injection of water, steam, polymers, carbon dioxide, or other fluids and gases.

Banned would be the drilling of any new oil or gas wells as well as the reactivation of any idle wells.

The measure also allows property owners to request an exemption from the City Council should it determine the application of the new code "would constitute an unconstitutional taking of property."

A spokeswoman for a group supporting domestic oil production said the measure would hurt California by making it more reliant on imported oil.

"This is an arbitrary energy ban that goes beyond hydraulic fracturing and targets techniques used for decades in California," said Sabrina Lockhart, spokeswoman for Californians for Energy Independence, a statewide coalition of oil companies, including Occidental Petroleum.

Jesse LoVerme, a board member for Heights Oil Watch said it doesn't matter even if the techniques may have been used for decades.

"If they are harmful, we don't want them in or residential neighborhoods," LoVerme said. "It may be good somewhere else but not here."