

LA to hire oil and gas expert to help diffuse controversies

Sharon McNary, Southern California Public Radio, 2-18-16

The Los Angeles City Council voted on Wednesday to hire a petrochemical expert to oversee the city's relationship with oil and gas operations near residential neighborhoods. The person hired will likely manage such issues as the fallout from the Porter Ranch gas leak, controversial oil drilling facilities in South Los Angeles and growing criticism of major refineries in Wilmington.

City law has required the City Administrative Office to have a petroleum administrator on staff to oversee oil and gas operations in the city since the late 1950s. But for the past few decades that staffer has mostly been tasked with collecting royalty and lease checks and has not had the expertise to analyze geological issues or drilling proposals or assess their impact on public health.

The United Neighborhoods Neighborhood Council, which represents portions of the city near I-10 and Arlington Avenue, pressed city leaders to fill the position with a full-time staffer who understands oil and gas issues because the city hasn't had one on the payroll since the mid-1980s.

The group is in a dispute over the proposed flaring of gas from a well site near homes in South LA. Councilman Herb Wesson, who represents the area, proposed the city hire a full-time expert.

Michael Salman, who lives in the West Adams area, had been researching the city's petroleum-related laws and discovered that the city code required a petroleum administrator to facilitate communications within the city's departments and outside agencies.

He wrote the UNNC's position supporting revival of the petroleum administrator function.

"No one had been doing this job in the CAO's office since approximately 1990," Salman said. "So, for 25 years or a little bit more, these functions had not been fulfilled."

Any expert the city hires is expected be knowledgeable about not just the oil and gas operations, but also their impacts on public health.

"We're not just looking for some industry hack," Councilman Paul Koretz said.

The city council approved a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing and unconventional drilling practices in February 2014. But the progress on the ban has slowed as city staff began drafting an ordinance to either prohibit the practice or establish certain controls and oversight.

But to protect itself from lawsuits threatened by the oil and gas industry, the city attorney's office advised the council to act only on the basis of expert advice, not some generalized fear that fracking might alter water quality or increase the risk of earthquakes.

That expertise will be important as the city deals with Southern California Gas Co. on the future of the Aliso Canyon Gas Storage Facility near Porter Ranch. The underground gas field is outside city limits, however the residents affected by the gas leak were all within the city.

The petroleum administrator would also weigh in on issues like the land subsiding near oil fields, the underground gas field that extends under homes in Playa del Rey and complaints about oil and gas operations.

The city's planning department last year recommended against the council's moratorium proposal because of the "legal uncertainty around the extent of local government authority to regulate or prohibit well stimulation treatments," such as fracking.

A 2014 city analysis said local governments can control where oil and gas operations occur, but they cannot dictate the methods used. That has made it difficult for some local governments efforts to control fracking. Compton tried a moratorium and was sued by the Western States Petroleum Association. It later rescinded the measure.

A proposal to add another oil and gas expert to City Legislative Analyst office, which advises the council, is also working its way through committee and could be before the council for approval soon.