

# Shouting 'No' to Oil

## *Venoco Initiative Blistered as Assault on Local Control*

**Nick Welsh, Santa Barbara Independent, 2-18-10**

Venoco Oil executives were cast as the corporate heavies — big-monied special interests attempting to gut Carpinteria's small-town, local control during a political passion play Tuesday night about the Venoco-sponsored ballot initiative that would allow the company to expand dramatically its existing oil and gas plant behind City Hall. There, a standing-room-only crowd unanimously exhorted the City Council to denounce Measure J, the Venoco initiative that goes to city voters this June. Not a single speaker argued in favor of taking a neutral position, let alone in support of it. That the council would weigh in against Venoco was never in doubt; the only real suspense was whether the vote would be unanimous. It wasn't.

After delivering several agonized and at times pugnacious soliloquies, Councilmember Joe Armendariz voted against taking any position. "I'm not in favor of it and I'm not against it," said Armendariz, the most conservative member of the council. When the crowd hissed its disapproval, Armendariz shot back, "You may snicker, but it's a complex issue." Armendariz argued that a position of neutrality put City Hall in a stronger position both fiscally and legally — witness the \$300,000 the council has spent unsuccessfully fighting, he said, to keep the initiative off the ballot. Should the project be defeated at the polls and Venoco choose to resubmit plans to City Hall, Armendariz expressed concern that a vote to oppose Measure J might place future councils in some legal jeopardy. (Carpinteria's city attorney responded that such a legal threat could be easily side-stepped.) When the crowd hissed again, he commented, later adding, "The fact that some of you are so rude is absolutely incredible."

Councilmember Brad Stein concluded, "If we're not going to take a stand, we shouldn't be here."

Armendariz also challenged fellow councilmembers to argue why he should change his mind. After trying and failing, Councilmember Brad Stein concluded, "If we're not going to take a stand, we shouldn't be here." Stein took exception to the 175-foot-tall new onshore oil platform Venoco was proposing, but he focused primarily on the threat to local control he said the initiative posed. If approved, Stein argued, Measure J would strip the City Council of all decision-making authority when it came to environmental review, environmental mitigations, and discretionary permitting authority. Measure J would rewrite Carpinteria's General Plan and zoning ordinances to make the proposed development — dubbed the Paredon Project — in essence preapproved. Likewise, Councilmember Kathleen Reddington implored Armendariz to join with the majority. "Your license plate says, 'politics,'" she said. "Politics is about being a leader. Would you please ... ?" at which point Mayor Gregg Carty ruled Reddington's line of questioning inappropriate.

Carty's vote also was the subject of considerable suspense. At least one of his relatives had signed the ballot argument in favor of Measure J, prompting Venoco foes to argue Carty had a conflict of interest. Carty acknowledged that he was torn, and revealed he had hoped not to take a position. But after hearing the speakers' testimony, he said he had no choice but to oppose the project. "The initiative before us was written by a very smart, slick composer," he said, who would have voters believe that the path before them was safe and smooth. "I believe the road ahead is bumpy, dangerous, and we don't have our seatbelts on," he said.

Speakers argued that the council had no choice but to oppose Measure J. “Nobody elected an oil company to come into City Hall and take your place,” said former county planning commissioner Bob Sollen, who also covered the 1969 oil spill as a reporter for the Santa Barbara News-Press. When attorney Nathan Alley with the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) urged the council to take an official position against Measure J, Councilmember Armendariz all but called him a hypocrite. “You work for an organization that sold your endorsement for an oil and gas project for as much as \$100,000,” he said. “Did you have to wrestle with that decision?” Armendariz was referring to EDC’s role in brokering the still-controversial deal with oil company PXP to allow expansion of drilling at Tranquillon Ridge, off Point Conception, in exchange for a contractually agreed-upon shut-down date to PXP’s oil operations. (EDC has contended that the deal effectively will stop any future oil drilling off the coast of North County in the next 12 years; critics contend its terms are unenforceable.) Copies of the confidential deal between EDC and PXP, recently released, showed EDC was paid \$100,000 in attorneys’ fees. EDC has taken considerable heat from former allies for its role in the deal.

This past week, a contingent of Earth First! activists held a demonstration against EDC at Paseo Nuevo. They then hopped EDC’s courtyard wall, took down its environmental flag, and smeared it, the grounds, and walls with cardboard cutouts of dead fish with molasses — designed to look like oil. EDC Executive Director David Landecker lamented that none of the environmental groups now blasting the deal ever sought to discuss the matter first. Nor, he said, have they taken calls when EDC has sought to explain it. In response to Armendariz’s attack, EDC’s Alley said he took “umbrage” with the language in which the question was framed, but explained that EDC, as a law firm, customarily charges legal fees for its work.