

Oil Initiative Duel

Carp Councilmembers Spar over Paredon Project

Nick Welsh, Santa Barbara Independent, 3-11-10

The Carpinteria City Council on Monday reaffirmed its opposition to Measure J — the Venoco Oil-sponsored ballot initiative that would pave the way for a new slant drilling operation behind City Hall and just down the coast from “The World’s Safest Beach” — arguing that the initiative would strip City Hall of its customary regulatory authority and thus create “an unprecedented gap in local regulation.” In addition, the council contended the initiative “evades environmental review,” “does not benefit the local economy,” and would be so open-ended that Venoco could make major changes to the project after the fact, raising the prospect of an industrial-scale “bait and switch.” Finally, the council majority concluded that the amount of money City Hall might receive in the form of oil royalties — estimated by Venoco to be as high as \$200 million — from what’s been dubbed the “Paredon Project” was “uncertain and speculative.” No Venoco representative spoke against the adoption of these findings, but Councilmember Joe Armendariz, casting the lone dissenting vote, dismissed several of the findings as “factually inaccurate, shameful, and disgraceful.”

Although Armendariz has taken pains not to endorse the Venoco ballot initiative, he has consistently voted against any council action to officially oppose the oil company’s ballot proposal. After Monday night’s Carpinteria council meeting, Armendariz charged that Paredon’s opponents placed an anti-Measure J bumper sticker on his car. Noting that he’d been heckled by opponents two weeks ago, he asked, “What’s next? Is someone going to rip off my hood ornament?” On his Facebook page, Armendariz exclaimed, “Most of these people are kooks! I’m so tired of them already.”

Councilmember Al Clark, a critic of the Paredon project as well as Measure J, sent Armendariz an email demanding to know how he knew who bumper-stickered his car. “How do you know I didn’t put it on your car?” Clark asked. “And how do I know you didn’t put it on your car?” Such verbal sparring typified the back-and-forth between the two councilmembers Monday night.

Armendariz, for example, took exception to the contention that Measure J would allow Venoco to “evade” environmental review for the proposed Paredon project. Even if Measure J precluded the City of Carpinteria from subjecting the Paredon project to full environmental scrutiny, Armendariz argued, the California State Lands Commission, the Santa Barbara Air Pollution Control District (APCD), and the California Coastal Commission would all have direct environmental oversight of the project.

“The biggest canard being presented is that the project won’t be subjected to environmental scrutiny,” Armendariz said. “To the extent my colleagues want to officially — officially — mislead Carpinteria voters, that is their problem.”

Clark countered, “We were three-quarters of the way through environmental review. We had a draft environmental impact report that identified 11 Class I unavoidable and unmitigatable environmental impacts. Things were not looking good for Paredon, and that’s exactly what Venoco wants to avoid. That’s why they went with the initiative.”

As for the other agencies, Clark acknowledged they would exert some environmental oversight, but dismissed it as “indirect and far away.” Some of the agencies, he said, rely on regulated companies like Venoco to self-report.

Armendariz also took exception with the council resolution stating the initiative would not benefit the local economy. “I suppose the \$5-million Venoco has pledged to the Carpinteria Education Foundation won’t benefit the economy?” he asked.

Clark conceded, “Joe has a point. A little one, but a point.” Clark said the language in dispute referred to the lack of new jobs the new project would produce, and the prospective economic damage the community would suffer should an accidental discharge occur. As for the \$5 million donation, Clark noted that language was no longer included in the initiative itself, having been struck out by a Santa Barbara judge in response to the city’s lawsuit — thus far unsuccessful — that’s challenging the constitutionality of the initiative itself. Even so, Venoco executive Tim Marquez pledged — in a full-page ad appearing in last week’s Coastal View — that the oil company would donate up to \$5 million to “help local school children.” Clark was not persuaded. “That’s a trust-me statement made by Venoco,” he said.