

Jordan Takes Lead Role in Stand Against Carpinteria Slant-Drilling Operation

Lara Cooper, Noozhawk, 3-8-10

Venoco's Paredon project runs into opponents citing a flurry of concerns about open space, safety and process

Walking a trail along the Carpinteria Bluffs probably best illustrates Donna Jordan's apprehension with Venoco Inc.'s Paredon project.

If Carpinteria voters approve the oil company's slant-drilling initiative in a June special election, the operation will originate from Venoco's Dump Road property.

Extended-reach, or slant, drilling would allow access to oil and natural gas in the Santa Barbara Channel without using an offshore platform, and could reach up to 11,000 barrels of oil a day.

But Jordan, one of the key organizers opposing the project, is quick to cite multiple reasons why the project shouldn't go forward.

"It's not so much what it is, but where it is," said Jordan, referring to the 52-acre bluffs parcel of open space that abuts the Venoco property.

The bluffs were designated as open space more than a decade ago, when Jordan and a slew of other citizens came up with about \$4 million to purchase the property from a developer, who had planned hundreds of condominiums and a shopping mall for the site. At the base of the bluffs is a seal rookery, where five months out of the year seals come to bear their young. The mammals co-exist with Venoco's pier, which is used for oil and gas transportation.

Adjoining another side of the Venoco property are condos and senior mobile homes that lie downwind of where the new project would be located, which is another concern of Jordan, a former Carpinteria mayor and councilwoman.

Last week, Noozhawk sat down with Venoco's Lisa Rivas to hear the company's presentation of the project and the citizens' initiative — the Paredon Oil and Gas Development Initiative — on the June 8 ballot.

Standing on the other side of the issue are residents who have mobilized with Jordan as a part of the group, Citizens Against Paredon.

Various representatives of the group, including Jordan, have shown up at City Council meetings to rail against the project, in front of a council that, for the most part, shares their views. The majority of the council has taken issue with the Paredon project's route, saying the citizens' initiative circumvents the environmental review process.

Carpinteria's General Plan doesn't have provisions for slant drilling at an onshore location, and more than 1,000 signatures were gathered to put Paredon, now known as Measure J, before voters in the community of 14,000.

But because ballot initiatives like Paredon aren't subject to the California Environmental Quality Act before they are passed, Jordan and others wonder how accountable Venoco will be on the other side of the ballot box.

Venoco officials have said the project will still be subject to oversight agencies like the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District if it's approved.

But that response doesn't bring any comfort to Jordan.

"These agencies are remote, narrowly focused and rarely do anything on site," she said.

Venoco purchased the Dump Road facility from Chevron in 1999. Chevron had acquired permits for the site in the 1950s and the facility was there before the city of Carpinteria incorporated in 1965.

"It's still a 50 year old plant," Jordan said. "They bought this plant, and they knew it wasn't zoned for drilling."

Jordan said that when Venoco first came forward with the project, she was open-minded about it.

"I'm not an automatic anti-oil person," she said, acknowledging that oil is an essential part of South Coast energy use.

But it wasn't until Venoco was well into the environmental review process, Jordan said, that she started to get concerned with the project.

Jordan maintains that the initiative would change the General Plan, exempting only Venoco and forcing the city to issue permits — "except they can't issue them the normal way," she said.

The initiative says that if any part of Venoco's specific plan is inconsistent with the city's code or regulations, the plan takes precedence. It goes even further to say that if official policies of the city "frustrate" the company's purpose, the specific plan of the company has the authority to move forward.

"It ties the city's hands," Jordan said of the provision. "What they would do is an open-ended question."

Safety concerns come up often when Jordan talks about the Paredon project. The Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Department would have jurisdiction over the project if it is approved, and Jordan says that agency isn't as well equipped for oversight of oil and gas plants as Santa Barbara County teams, which regularly audit the plants for safety.

"If Venoco had completed the city's review process ... they would surely have come under the jurisdiction of county HazMat (Santa Barbara County Fire Department hazardous materials response) because the city would have contracted with them like Goleta does," she said.

"The Carp Fire Department has no such expertise and lacks the resources to really develop a similar team. This is worrisome, to say the least."

If voters approve Venoco's proposal, company representatives say Carpinteria and the county would be entitled to royalties and revenue of as much as \$200 million. Venoco has also said 20 acres of coastal land would be donated to the city as open space, and \$5 million will be donated to the Carpinteria Education Foundation.

But revenue sharing with local governments from new development on existing tideland leases is part of a bill that expired in 2007, and Jordan said she feels the city can't count on this revenue.

Jordan said she's been taken aback by all the volunteers willing to join the effort against the project. More than 85 people showed up recently to walk precincts door to door, talking about the project.

The group put also put out door hangers, which had tear-away cards that people could mail in with their responses to the project.

“People were writing and responding ‘never in our town,’” she said. “I didn’t expect that kind of reaction. For some time, people have been complacent. This has stirred them up.”

Jordan estimates about 200 people are involved in the effort now, and they have a table at the Carpinteria farmers market each Thursday to pass out literature.

Representatives from both Venoco and Citizens Against Pardon have one thing in common, however, and that’s that they’re both encouraging Carpinterians to read the entire initiative before making a decision.

And as for the June 8 election?

“I have confidence in the voters to do the right thing,” Jordan said.