

Oil Well Drill Sites Update, October 2023

Neighbors for a Safe Environment (NASE) is a local community nonprofit organization concerned with the West Pico drill site, and all the drill sites in CD5 and the city as a whole. They prevented installation of a natural gas burning flare at the Rancho Park drill site after the November 2017 mercaptan leak.

Currently there are troubling developments at all four drill sites in CD5 including at Hillcrest and Rancho Park. There are new unapproved projects on oil wells at West Pico and Hillcrest. More unapproved projects were attempted at Rancho Park and Hillcrest this past year. At West Pico the oil company's new projects on wells are being waived through by the ZA without required formal applications and reviews despite the fact that NASE won a unanimous city council vote in May 2023 granting their appeal to require an environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This is also happening despite the city's new law that prohibits such projects unless they qualify for a health, safety, or environmental exception after an application and a full zoning administrator review. Salman explained that we can see the pattern of the ZA not following city law and the state CEQA law. At Hillcrest, three projects on wells were executed in fall 2022, without application to the ZA (Zoning Administrator) for city approval and for CEQA clearance. This was brought to the city's attention. In response the ZA is proposing to grant the project retroactive approval a year later without public notice, without CEQA and without a public hearing by claiming that there was a "eminent emergency threat to public health safety, or the environment". However, the ZA is not telling anyone what the emergency threat actually is. This is an abuse of a provision in the city's new law that prohibits new projects and oil wells unless they can be shown in a full review to address a health, safety or environmental problem and to do it in public, with an exception only for emergency cases. A second pattern is that the ZA is making oil cases disappear from public view by not requiring full formal applications, not giving public notice, not putting proposals through CEQA's environmental analysis, and not holding public hearings. There is a third pattern that is emerging that's worse and may hit the communities around Hillcrest and Rancho Park drill sites harder than anywhere else in the city. Last week it was discovered that a deputy city attorney, who handles oil cases, appears to be contending that the city's new law that prohibits drilling new wells, re-drilling existing wells, and performing maintenance projects on wells does not apply at the West Pico Drill site. Her contention, according to Salman, is based on a clearly erroneous reading of past ZA approvals for West Pico and her implicit incorrect assumption that the city's new oil law does not prevail over old approvals. If the deputy city attorney's approach were to be applied across all oil drill sites in the city, then her implicit assumption that new law does not prevail over old approvals would hit worst of all at the communities around the Hillcrest and Rancho Park drill sites. The original 1957 and 1958 approvals for those sites were issued a dozen years before the protections of CEQA existed and 60 years prior to current environmental knowledge. The city's new law makes statements of authorization for future new projects that are comparatively clearer and more explicit than what the ZA wrongly claims about the 1957 and 1958 approvals and what the deputy city attorney wrongly claims is an authorization at West Pico which dates to 2000. At Hillcrest and Rancho Park, the implications of the deputy city attorney's incorrect assumption about the new law and her lax reading of old approvals would allow the operating oil company to drill dozens of new wells and perform unlimited maintenance projects on wells, all without ever applying to the ZA or going through any CEQA reviews or public hearings. NASE will have community updates and will need to ask for our help.

