

Benicia needs an ISO

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As a long-time advocate for local measures and policies that aim to protect public health and safety, I urge everyone who shares this concern to attend the panel discussion, to be held this coming Tuesday, Nov. 14 at the Benicia Public Library, about what adoption of an Industrial Safety Ordinance ["ISO"] could mean for Benicia. The panel has been organized to learn from Contra Costa County experts about the usefulness, effectiveness and historical development of their county's by now well-established ISO. An ISO can serve the public's interest and right to know what's in our air in real time in the event of acute emergencies involving hazardous, toxic emissions affecting local air quality, whether the potential source of toxic releases is the refinery or other major facility, (for example, the city's wastewater treatment plant and the Port of Benicia). Our experiences of the unexpected power outage at Valero last May is a case in point: if the winds had blown toward Southampton that day, as winds typically do in fall and winter, an evacuation would have had to be called for schools and residences. How would the whole community have been notified? How soon would we have known? How much information would have been made available? What about evacuation procedures? As it happened, the winds blew toward the Industrial Park, and flaring continued for two more weeks as the refinery restarted operations. There were problems with notifications, traffic backups on I-680, etc. etc. While our city's emergency response got into gear, there were obvious problems with delayed or withheld reporting.

In my view, an ISO tailored to our city should include: requirements for an updated "best technology" public warning system, explicit evacuation planning, protocols and procedures; requirements for reporting incidents and conditions in real time; coordination with the Air District, and access to a networked local/regional air-monitoring system. We must remember our "downwind" neighbors (depending on where the wind blows, in Suisun, Vallejo, Crockett, Rodeo, Martinez) who could benefit also from better emergency warning and reporting in Benicia that a local ISO may provide. All in all, I'm concerned in general that we improve our community's protections for public health and safety. There's no time like the present to be better prepared for the next emergency.

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