

Letter: The air, in real time

By Pat Toth-Smith

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“The refinery should be held to higher safety standards, the same standards that the four refineries in Contra Costa are held to,” said Supervisor John Gioia. The number of serious refinery accidents in Contra Costa have dropped since the industrial safety ordinance was adopted in 1999, according to Gioia. “It gets refineries to change the way they look at risk, minimize and reduce risk,” Gioia said. “It’s an effective ordinance.”

These quotes came from a May 23 posting on KQED online, following the May 5 Valero flaring incident.

There are many reasons for a Benicia ISO, including more local input into the regulations that affect Benicians, better reporting to the city and the community when an accident occurs, possible prevention of the same kind of accident through a thorough review process with potential interventions and — most importantly — the installation of real-time air monitoring in residential areas of Benicia.

Real-time monitoring is up and running in other parts of the Bay, airwatchbayarea.org is online and has a mobile app that will let you see current and historic readings from community monitors in Richmond, Crockett and Rodeo.

In Benicia, there is one private person who is monitoring the air with his monitor. Unfortunately, the Benicia monitor only has readings for dust and particulate matter, unlike other community monitors that provide data on a variety of air pollutants. The real-time air monitors in Richmond, Crockett and Rodeo provide data on a host of different toxic pollutants recorded in the air at varying times of day. Some of the chemicals monitored are Benzene, Hydrogen Sulfide, and Sulfur Dioxide, which can result in serious adverse health effects at certain levels. Another good example of this same type of monitoring that can occur with the Benicia ISO is the Richmond Community Air Monitoring Program online at www.fenceline.org/richmond/index.htm.

The Richmond Community Air Monitoring Program and /or the Air Watch Bay Area models would be an important safety tools here in Benicia, especially for families with asthmatic children or adults. Statistics from the 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regarding average asthma rates throughout the state of California, listed Solano County as having a 30 percent average asthma rate compared to the state of California’s 14 percent rate. So we would especially benefit from ongoing air monitoring. Knowing the air quality in real time could help families make decisions as to whether they limit their time or their child’s time outdoors in an especially poor air quality day and having a refinery as a neighbor, even one with a publicly stated good safety record, it would be important to know whether the air contains toxic substances. This would help the

town of Benicia assuage the “worries” of people who have felt reluctant to move to a refinery town when they can definitively see the air quality in real time.

Having a Benicia ISO would make air monitoring and the safety of the residents in Benicia a top priority, whereas to the state of California and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) we’re just another community in their jurisdiction.

— *Pat Toth-Smith/Benicia*