

Kathy Kerridge: Working toward a local safety ordinance to keep Benicians safe, informed

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Benicia is the only city in Solano County that is home to a refinery – and the only Bay Area refinery city left unprotected by a local Industrial Safety Ordinance (ISO). Fortunately, the City of Benicia can learn from State and Contra Costa County expertise in order to develop and implement its own. The Contra Costa County ISO has been praised as the best safety ordinance in the country, so effective that Cal OSHA and Cal EPA adopted many elements for state regulation and oversight.* Such a local ordinance is sorely needed to prevent and minimize the effects of devastating accidents on the employees close to the accident and the surrounding communities. The new statewide ISO is a good start, especially when it comes to protecting refinery employees, but a local ordinance is needed to protect and inform the community of Benicia, home to Valero Refinery, which has the capacity to produce 170,000 barrels of refined fuel a day.

We commend our neighbor Valero for its award-winning reputation as a safe facility. However, the near-catastrophic May 5 Valero Refinery emergency shutdown and major flaring incident was an eye-opening moment for many of us. Communications between the refinery, investigators and our community were late on the scene and follow through on impacts to our city was scant. A local ISO would fix that and could facilitate cooperation between industry, the city, the county, local fire departments, Cal OSHA, Cal EPA, other agencies that have oversight of businesses, and the public in the prevention and reduction of incidents at refineries like Valero. An ISO would also establish local air quality monitors for access to real time data.

A local ISO would require among other things, refineries and other chemical businesses to submit a safety plan, undergo safety audits, and have risk management plans, each of which would allow more community input and access. Why should Benicia be the only jurisdiction in the East Bay with a refinery or chemical industry that does not have a local safety ordinance such as the city of Richmond and other refinery communities have?

Because Benicia deserves to be properly protected and informed, Benicians for a Safe and Healthy Community, Progressive Democrats of Benicia, Carquinez Patriotic Resistance and additional community groups are urging the City Council to adopt and implement an Industrial Safety Ordinance for Benicia.

Experts from Cal OSHA, Cal EPA and Contra Costa County are willing to help get this effort underway and will be discussing the advantages of a local ISO and how it works with the state's efforts tonight at 7 p.m. in the Doña Benicia Room at the Benicia Public Library. The public is invited – please come.

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