

Ralph E. Dennis: Benicia industrial safety ordinance enhances public health, safety

POSTED: 04/25/18, 3:16 PM PDT | UPDATED: 1 WEEK, 1 DAY AGO

In his letter of April 22, Roger Straw cited a March report from the Solano County Department of Health showing that Benicia's rate of emergency room and hospital admissions related to asthma is much higher in comparison to statewide numbers.

I wonder if anything in Benicia's air contributes to — or is the principle cause for — these differences. Well, since Benicia has virtually no community-wide air monitoring in place presently, it's difficult if not impossible to determine what's in Benicia's air.

Mr. Straw also mentioned that he is working with a local group of Benicians who are asking the Benicia City Council to adopt a community industrial safety ordinance (ISO). I, too, am part of the working group and look forward to the council's vote to "agendize" consideration and adoption of an ISO. When enacted, Benicia's ISO should include provisions that monitor Benicia's air on a 24-hour, 7-day basis and tell us in real time what's in our air. Especially when incidents occur releasing hazardous, toxic emissions into Benicia's air — like the May 5, 2017 incident at Valero, which continued multiple times over the subsequent two weeks.

Benicia's monitoring program would be funded from ISO fees paid by the facilities subject to the ISO and would complement, incorporate, and contribute to air monitoring programs in the region as well as any that may come to Benicia in the future.

I also wonder if any of those emissions from Valerio's May 2017 incidents contributed to Benicia's higher-than-statewide rate of asthma-related emergency room and hospital admissions. Well, again it's impossible to say, mostly because the City of Benicia never received reports from the county officials who investigated the incident. And, the community remains largely in the dark since it has had no opportunity for engagement with Valero to seek answers to what happened and why, as well as what fixes have been done to prevent the root causes of the incidents from arising again. Benicia's ISO would remedy that absence of information — through data from community-wide air monitoring showing what's in Benicia's air, and also by reports mandated from affected facilities to the City of Benicia and community.

Benicia is the only city with a refinery in the Bay Area lacking the public health and safety protection that an ISO provides for a community. The experiences of Contra Costa since its enactment of an ISO show that an ISO results in a safer and better informed community. Refinery accidents have gone down since implementation of the ISO, according to Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia. And, according to Randy Sawyer, Contra Costa Chief Environmental Health and Hazardous Materials Officer, communities are safer and better informed through public meetings with the refinery

after incidents, notifications to the community 72 hours after incidents and every 30 days after until final report issued, and from audits and reports prompted through ISO compliance.

A Benicia ISO is all about improving the public health and safety of Benicia's residents. Absent an ISO ordinance, Benicia's asthma-related admissions to emergency rooms and hospitals will probably remain higher than statewide numbers. And, with no ISO, the City of Benicia and its residents will remain in the dark on what's in the air.

I urge you to support the city council's consideration and adoption of an ISO by contacting Mayor Patterson, Vice Mayor Steve Young, and fellow Councilmembers Tom Campbell, Mark Hughes, and Alan Schwartzman to let them know Benicia's public health and safety requires a community industrial safety ordinance.

— *Ralph E. Dennis/Benicia*