

Birdseye puts safety first

By Pat Toth-Smith, September 9, 2018

It's been a few years since the 2016 CRUDE BY RAIL permit for Valero was denied, but a strong memory of it remains for me and probably for a lot of Benicians. It's because of that experience that I'm urging Benicians to vote for Kari Birdseye for the Benicia City Council.

Birdseye was a new planning commissioner when the permit process fell into the planning commissioners' authority and she really did her homework to keep us safe in Benicia.

When I spoke to her about that process, she said she would stay up long into the night reading the stacks of material submitted to the commissioners, and also would focus intently on everything the public said during the planning commission meetings. She added, "But it was really Kamala Harris (California State Attorney General at that time) who made the biggest impact on her in her comment about how local permitting measures absolutely applied to this process. Kari said "I knew then, that the state of California had our back." Birdseye voted against the permit along with all the other planning commissioners.

When I asked her why she denied the permit besides the significant local reasons, her voice choked when she said "My dad, my husband, my sister and my two children live here, why would I want to risk the health and safety of my family, friends, and all Benicians by bringing in 100 crude oil rail cars into our town, when the safety of this form of transport was in question with the rapid increase of oil train explosions. I did not want our town to be the next tragic headline news story.

She continued, "After listening to so many of the speakers say, "I'm afraid of this," let's not do this", "we don't need this for our community," "Valero doesn't need this", and "there are safer ways to bring in their oil." Our community certainly wasn't in favor of it, so how could I possibly vote for it. "

After the planning commission denial, Valero appealed to the city council to certify the Environmental Impact Report and issue the permit. This is where another 2018 city council candidate, Christina Strawbridge, who was a council member at that time, and after much deliberation, also voted to deny Valero's appeal for the permit. It ended up being a unanimous vote to deny Valero's appeal for the permit, mostly based on the planning commissioner's work.

Another of the 2018 city council candidates, Lionel Largaespada, was also involved in the Crude by Rail process. Largaespada was in favor of approving the permit and commented to the planning commission before their vote, "I understand the concerns. I understand the risks. But I urge you to be objective and pragmatic. Because the fact -- the reality is that we need this project to ensure Benicia's economic future and prosperity. I urge you to certify the EIR and to issue the conditional use permit."

Based on this recent history of our town and the way the candidates handled the Crude by Rail issue, I'm encouraging Benicians to vote for Kari Birdseye because I think she has the compassion and diligence to do the hard work to put the safety of our community first, especially when the next big permitting process comes along. Also, praise to Christina Strawbridge, because she did the right thing.

Pat Toth-Smith, Benicia Resident & member of Benicians for a Safe and Healthy Community