This election is about Valero

By Marilyn Bardet, October 25, 2018

Whoever is elected to the Benicia City Council, one thing is sure: watchdogging the refinery will be a crucial, on-going ethical responsibility to secure greater protections for our community's health and safety for the long haul. The refinery isn't going anywhere: Valero recently built a spanking new laboratory on site, worth $50 million. What will they do next?

So, considering the three candidates vying for two council seats, Kari Birdseye and Christina Strawbridge have my votes. Why?

Lionel Largaespada has business ties with Valero. That's a problem when loyalty trumps evidence-based reasoning and accountability. In his previous run for council, Lionel failed *the* major test of independence in declaring early support for Valero's Crude By Rail Project, despite Valero's dismissive downplaying of the project's potential dangerous impacts to public health, safety and the environment, and by extension, to the City's reputation as a "safe place to live and work." Championing CBR approval, Lionel echoed Valero's claims that mostly circled around their economic importance to the City. Last year, in the wake of the refinery's disastrous sudden shutdown, Lionel waffled on the need for an Industrial Safety Ordinance, which would add community protections and give the City of Benicia real authority and leverage during major emergency response situations—"a seat at the table." Huh? As someone quipped, "If you're not at the table, you can end up on the menu." No wonder Valero supports Lionel's candidacy.

On the bright side of the historical record, during the grueling 3-year public debate on CBR, Kari Birdseye, on the Planning Commission, and Christina Strawbridge, then on Council, each carefully reviewed the EIR and took seriously the national evidence of numerous oil train derailments involving horrific explosions that occurred between 2012 and 2016. They listened and addressed the public's concerns. Kari made clear why she opposed CBR, reasoning it to be an ill-conceived, dangerous project and land use. Then, when Valero defiantly appealed the Commission's unanimous decision to reject the permit, Christina, seen as the Council's swing vote, voted to deny Valero's appeal, signaling her support for the Commission's evaluations.

These are primary reasons why I'm voting for two strong, positive, independent-minded women who've demonstrated that they put protecting community health and safety "first." In my view, this means supporting adoption of an Industrial Safety Ordinance, to give our city necessary, immediate and long-range clout with the refinery—"a seat at the table" being an investment in increased community protections to include community-based air monitoring capability that would give the public access to real-time data about what we're breathing.

I believe Kari and Christina—that they'll hold Valero accountable to the City's and community's health and safety aims, and promote future-oriented, clean economic development that fits Benicia's (and the state's) climate protection goals and sustainability standards. Join me in electing them both!

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