

Vallejo Times-Herald: Benicia residents protest Valero's role in local elections

[BenIndy Editor: This front page above-the-fold Vallejo Times-Herald story is excellent, great photos and quotes. However there are a few errors in the article. Valero has spent \$519K over the last 3 election cycles, not \$678K. In our 2022 election, the Valero PAC has reported so far funneling \$73K of its \$232,000 into the effort to buy Benicia council seats, not the total. We won't know how much more until required post-election reporting. - RS]

Residents fed-up with the energy corporation's slanted advertising campaigns, calling them deceitful, shameful, and confusing.



Nikki Basch-Davis, left, talks with Susan Street as dozens of Benicians took to the streets on Wednesday to speak out against the influence of the Valero Benicia Refinery in the local 2022 election. (Chris Riley/Times-Herald)

[Vallejo Times-Herald](#), By Troy Sambajon, November 3, 2022

It's the small town versus big business fighting over the voice of local democracy.

Concerned Benicians gathered at City Park on Wednesday afternoon to protest the Valero corporations' role in local city council and mayoral elections.

Over the last three election cycles since 2018, the energy corporation has pumped over \$678,000 into online campaign ads, mailers, and push polls that both candidates and citizens are calling deceiving, clumsy, and shameful.

“My biggest fear is that when people read these mailers, they won’t know who they’re from and they won’t know why they’re trying to persuade them,” said rally organizer and longtime Benicia resident Kathy Kerridge. “I don’t want Benicia to become a company town. I don’t want our city council to be made up of just people who are favorable to Valero.”

Valero is a Texas-based energy corporation with a medium-sized refinery in Benicia. While the refinery is a large employer in the small town, the energy titan has found itself at odds with community organizers and environmental activists, upset over Valero’s election involvement.

Heading into this November election for the small city of 28,000 residents, the Valero-funded PAC, Working Families for a Strong Benicia, has funneled over \$232,000 into what critics say are slanted campaign ads, sending thousands of flyers to residents of Benicia.

One ad praised Valero’s preferred candidates for protecting public safety, showing a person wearing a mask. Those same candidates voted against the mask ordinance at the start of the pandemic, and one candidate, Lionel Largaespada, supported bringing controversial “crude-by-rail” oil trains into Benicia.

Another ad showed images of Mayor Steve Young and Vice-Mayor Tom Campbell under a banner saying “Committee to Re-elect Lionel Largaespada and Christina Strawbridge” despite the fact that the Mayor and Vice-Mayor do not support the Valero-backed candidates. The Mayor and Vice-Mayor support Terry Scott and Kari Birdseye for City Council, the Valero candidates’ rivals.

Young wasn’t thrilled by Valero’s advertisements.

“I am personally offended that Valero would misrepresent my endorsement,” Young said. “This is an obvious attempt to mislead voters about whom Vice Mayor Campbell and I are supporting.”

While individual candidates are only permitted to raise \$32,400 for their campaigns, corporate donations have no such limit for their campaign contributions. With deeper pockets and big-business resources, Valero could sway public opinion and the entire local election.

This isn’t the first time the Valero PAC has poured money into Benicia’s local elections.

In 2018 and 2020, the Valero PAC raised \$192,000 and \$254,000 for campaign ads and push polls for the city council and mayoral election. A push poll is a survey via phone meant to persuade public opinion. If the respondent said he/she was voting for Birdseye, then the caller was to recommend that the potential voters reconsider. During those council races, Valero money went behind Strawbridge again and Largaespada. Each won their seats then and now they hope to do it again.

As protesters outside City Park held up signs reading “Valero Poisons Our Elections”, activist and organizer Kerridge said Benicians need to wake up and head to the election voting stations with a clear and conscious mind.

“I urge all Benicians to pay attention to the fine print on these mailers, understand who is paying for advertising, ask why it is so important for Valero to influence our elections, and finally, to get out and vote.”