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Quality-of-life concerns drive Whittier Hills Oil Watch members to fight oil drilling

By Mike Sprague, Staff Writer
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Whittier Hills Oil Watch president Dan Duran rallies protestors carry signs opposing an oil drilling project the city council will soon decide on June 22, 2010. The group gathered at city hall prior to attending the city council meeting. (SGVN/Staff photo by Leo Jarzomb)

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WHITTIER - Whittier resident Dan Duran never planned on leading rallies on the steps of City Hall, speaking to service groups or sending out e-mails and putting out signs on what may become one of the city's biggest issues.

But Duran, 63, has found himself doing all that as president of the Whittier Hills Oil Watch that on Tuesday brought 150 people out to oppose drilling for oil in the Whittier hills.

"I've had to put other things aside and cancel vacations," Duran said. "This is has become a full-time engagement."

He and others say they have taken up this cause because they are so concerned about what drilling would do to their current quality of life.

"It's been an idyllic place to live," he said of his home on Catalina Avenue he has lived in for 15 years and his wife, Alicia Moisa-Duran, has been there for 25 years.

"It's what I called literally living in the country but still attached to a city," he said. "It's been the best of both worlds."

But now Duran and others say they are afraid drilling for oil would destroy their idealic residential setting.

Special Section

Special Section: Whittier Looks for Oil


Briefing: Negotiations to drill Whittier Hills for oil



Photo Gallery: Matrix Oil Corp.'s facility

Timeline of drilling in Whittier

found in Fontana home
Gold Line Foothill
Extension from Pasadena

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Roy Williams Jr., farmer at
heart, dies at age 80

"The first thing I imagined were trucks coming through this small street where children play," he said. "I imagined the visual impairment as a result of a 130-foot drilling rig. Instead of the beautiful sound of children, we would have the sounds of a processing facility."

For Duran, stopping what he calls "that nightmare" began in February after attending a community

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meeting where J.C. "Mac" McFarland, a consultant for Matrix Oil Co., which wants to drill for oil, discussed the project.

The community members asked a lot of questions and afterward, Duran and Whittier residents Roy McKee, Brenda Williams and her husband, Mark, and Michelle Newcomb starting talking about what they could do to oppose the project.

McKee is now vice president, Brenda Williams is the communications officer, Toni Donovan and Lupe Sahagun are co-treasurers and Steve Zavtsky is the speakers coordinator.

"We agreed that our goal would be to wake up the city, and alarm them as much possible about the proposed oil drilling project with our goal of not allowing any drilling in the city," Duran said.

And in the second week of February they founded

Whittier Hills Oil Watch.

They started knocking on doors, finding that few people knew about the project.

The group blames the city for not doing enough publicity.

"Since this is a tremendously large project, the amount of involvement the city used to try and (publicize) it was very small compared to what the project is," McKee said.

Plenty of press

Councilman Bob Henderson said he believes the city

has done a lot to publicize the proposal, pointing out there have been many articles in this newspaper - 12 from March 13, 2008 to February of this year - it's been on television and the neighborhood received notices of a city meeting about the project.

"If some people weren't paying attention, there's not a responsibility to knock on every door and have a personal conversation," Henderson said.

After several organizational meetings, the group held a community meeting on April 1 at the Whittier Community Center and 75 people showed up.

"We were just knocked out by the amount of interest, concern and expressions of real distaste for this project," Duran said.

They continued organizing. Duran wrote a guest editorial for this newspaper, and the group attended Friendly Hills Property Owners Association meetings.

"There were questions about toxicity, noise and about Lodosa Avenue," said Duran, referring to the street that backs up against a proposed access road for the project.

About a month ago, they began getting money to pay for signs and a website, www.whittierhillsoilwatch.org. Still, most of the money to pay for these things until recently came from the organizers of the group.

They also put together a color flier criticizing the proposal and asking for help. The Friendly Hills Property Owners Association at its June 2 meeting agreed to mail them to their members.

Members of the group have gone to East Whittier City School District and Rio Hondo College board meetings.

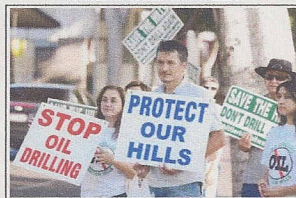
More than 200 people showed up for a June 12 meeting at a resident's home where speakers talked about noise, carcinogenics, traffic congestion and other issues.

Questions answered?

Duran said the group has lots of questions they want answered and they don't want to wait for the environmental impact report to be issued to get them.

Photo Gallery

Whittier Hills Oil Watch



"We keep on being told wait until the EIR as if that's the only chance for input," Duran said. "It's like Christmas. They say, 'Wait until Christmas. You can open the presents and if don't like it you can complain then. Just trust us.'"

But Duran said he's afraid the report will be written to meet the needs of Matrix Oil and not the community.

Henderson said while Matrix is paying for the report, the city hired Marine Research Specialists of Ventura.

"They're being paid for by the city," he said. "We're the client, not Matrix. (Matrix) has no ability to control anything that MRS does."

Duran said his group wants to know lots of information now - such as how many are within different distances of the drilling project, how many trucks will be on the streets and even if drilling will go under their homes.

"What's the methodology?" he asked. "What's the science?"

Henderson said most of the questions - Matrix will not be able to drill under anybody's home - are legitimate concerns.

"All are addressed and they would be mitigated," he said.

"It's why you do an EIR - to study all of those things, such as traffic, water, noise, the habitat, impact on neighbors," he said. "All of those things have to be addressed by law and have to be discussed in great detail."

And then people will have an opportunity to discuss and even challenge the information in the report, Henderson said.

"I think the problem right now is the group is saying don't do an EIR because we don't want to know what the facts are."

Black gold

Henderson said oil could be an asset to the city - it could bring as much as \$9 million a year if Matrix was able to bring up as much oil as Chevron could before stopping in 1992.

"It would be really bad for us to take unfounded fears from the immediate surrounding neighbors and tell the rest of the people of Whittier they can't have the benefits for better services and more facilities and protect the stability of the community for decades to come," Henderson said.

"We owe it to the city of Whittier to study these issues," he said.

Another issue has been how much land will be used. McKee said he believes it's more like 17 acres and he's afraid that Matrix will eventually ask for more.

"We think they're opening up the spigot," he said. "This spigot could be a fire hydrant opening up development."

Henderson said while the actual space that will be needed is uncertain, it won't exceed 7 acres for the three drilling sites. In addition, there might be an additional 1.2 acres for an access road.

Another 10 acres could be used temporarily but they would be restored with native vegetation, he said.

There is no way additional land would be allowed for Matrix, Henderson said.

Another issue is Mar Vista Elementary School that will be used as a special education preschool on Ocean View Avenue that is near the oil drilling site.

Williams said she's concerned about the noise that could bother autistic children there.

Henderson agreed that the school is a concern and the issue of noise must be addressed. One possibility could be to construct a 15-foot-high berm so the oil drilling sites couldn't be seen and noise would be blocked.

Battle's just begun

Members of the group said while they've asked the council to just stop the process now, they're prepared to keep battling even after an EIR is released.

"There will be a series of battles and skirmishes," Duran said. "Our job is to make sure we're fighting the right ones. We're prepared to go to the next steps."

Duran, an associate professor of business at Whittier College, said they have talked to national groups, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, about getting help in their battle.

And the battle is worthwhile, he said.

"I hear the birds and owls," he said. "I hear kids laughing and playing. These are great sounds. What I don't want to hear are diesel and gas trucks going up and down the street. I don't want to hear the clanking of metal. I don't want to hear the 'whoosh' as they're doing natural gas processing."