

Environmental Justice Means Healthy and Safe Housing

by Supervisor Linda Parks, May 2017

You know development is a problem in an area when 193 apartments, condos and houses are proposed on prime farmland, next to large open tanks of sewage, across from heavy industrial uses, in a city (Ventura) that doesn't have enough water.

When this development project, called Northbank, came to the Local Agency Formation Commission last month, LAFCo staff recommended it be denied. The State empowers LAFCo to promote preservation of farmland, environmental justice, and orderly growth. Not having an adequate water supply is usually reason enough for LAFCo to deny annexing land into a city for development. Yet despite staff's recommendation to reject the proposal, the Commission approved it. Commissioners cited a need for more housing and were sympathetic to the landowners, the Vanoni farming family, who said they could no longer farm their land because of encroaching urban development. Supporters testified that all the obstacles associated with the proposed housing project could be overcome.

What was missing from the testimony, however, were the voices of future residents who will be living in Northbank, directly across from where 100 garbage trucks start up at 5 AM each morning to begin picking up trash in our neighborhoods.

Between the diesel emissions and noise from the trash trucks, loud bangs and vibration from the unloading of large roll-off trash bins at the storage yard, sounds of crushing metal from the metal recycling yard, and fumes from a fueling station on the east side of the project site; odors from two 15-foot high open tanks of sewage on the south side; and a railroad track with train traffic bordering the site to the north; this location is the worst for future residents of any I've considered.

During LAFCo discussion, one Commissioner noted he had driven by the site and found surprisingly loud noise coming from the sewer plant, but said he had to roll his car windows up before determining the source because the area smelled so bad. The sewage tanks will be just 200 feet from the homes. How do you overcome such obstacles?

The solution selected was to put a condition on the project to notify residents that they are living next to an industrial area.

When I made the lone dissenting vote at LAFCo on this project, I said I couldn't help but think of the future residents. Imagine, for example, a mother of a 4-year old with asthma, having to deal with the daily health-damaging effects of excessive exhaust fumes. Or the senior citizen opening the windows at night for a cool breeze and getting wafts of sewage instead. Or the many who will be awoken at dawn to the sound of garbage trucks backing up and rolling out. I recommended that a different use be considered for the land, such as light manufacturing or offices that wouldn't expose people to noxious odors, fumes and noise 24 hours a day.

While the Northbank development proposal did get the greenlight, LAFCo Commissioners were concerned enough about the already over-drafted water supply in the city of Ventura that they

conditioned their approval on proof of water to serve the project. Currently in a Stage 3 drought with inadequate supplies of water, the City is pursuing a proposal to build a pipeline to bring in imported water, and another proposal to treat sewer water to drinking water standards.

A recent Star editorial, "Justice for a Housing Project" (April 30, 2017) lauded LAFCo Commissioners for approving the Northbank housing project, pointing out that justice had been served for the Vanoni family and for those in need of housing. Yet there is another kind of justice that went unmentioned, the environmental justice of building homes in an unhealthful place to live. It should be noted that of the different housing types in the Northbank project, it is the apartments that will be closest to the sewer plant and garbage truck yard, with units set aside for low-income families.

The Northbank project highlights the major challenges to development in our region that make win-win projects more difficult to achieve. However win-wins are still possible, and I and others are supporting having healthy places for people to live, that benefit the community at large. Prioritizing health and safety is essential, particularly when making decisions that have such long-term impacts.