



Tainted soil program win/win for city

commentary by Marty Mariscal

Many who know me have been asking me why I have not written this piece earlier. I just didn't think that a written response was necessary to accusations that the City Council would place monetary gain above the health of its citizens by taking impacted soils from the Guadalupe Dunes.

Why did I think a response was not necessary? Because it's hard for me to believe that anyone would think the City Council would do such a thing. To even hint that I or anybody on this City Council would vote to put our citizens at risk for any reason is toxic.

Anyone who voiced concern about this project was given or offered all of the information used by staff and the City Council in determining whether or not to institute the Non-Hazardous Hydrocarbon Impacted Soils (NHIS) program at the landfill. It is unfortunate that these same people have either not wanted to see this information, or after reviewing the information, have made emotional conclusions that are not supported by the facts. They have then gone out into the public or written letters to the editor, using only their opinions, not fact, to present a position designed to just plain scare people. This is wrong.

The NHIS program was initially adopted by the City Council in March 2001, after a series of studies, preliminary testing, a draft environmental study, and adoption of the final environmental impact report. This project was and is still subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which requires public input and presentation. At each of the public hearings, no one voiced concern, nor was there any opposition presented about the project.

There have been demands that the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, California EPA/Integrated Waste Management Board, and the California Department of Toxics and Substance Control investigate this program. These are the very agencies that participated in the design and approval of the NHIS program. The city did not act alone on this project.

Commercial or industrial operations can create soils with differing levels of impact. Soils are tested to evaluate what the impacts can mean to humans. Soils containing toxic or hazardous substances require disposal in a facility certified to handle this material. There is no such facility in Santa Maria.

Soils may also be classified as non-hazardous. Some soils classified as non-hazardous may be further classified, as a beneficial re-use material. Examples of beneficial re-use include road material for agricultural areas, road base in streets and highways, or grading materials.

The program at the regional landfill is authorized to only use soils classified as non-hazardous, beneficial re-use. The soils from the Guadalupe Dunes meet these criteria. This soil is being used as part of the foundation layer to create proper sloping for closure of our regional landfill. A clay cap and three more feet of vegetation will be placed on top of the NHIS foundation layer. The California EPA/Integrated Waste Management Board specifically approved this foundation layer as a beneficial re-use. This will prevent rainfall from mixing with the trash.

As a further protection to our residents and the groundwater basin, the landfill utilizes a state of the art membrane technology that layers the solid waste and the associated soils. This membrane technology, along with very stringent monitoring requirements provide a level of protection that would never be achieved if the soils were used in other parts of the valley as permitted under their 'beneficial re-use' designation. In essence, by placing these soils at the landfill, we are actually protecting and conserving the water basin better and much more effectively.

Concerns have also been raised about not having a voice regarding the trucking of these soils through Santa Maria. Some have suggested that a public hearing could have forced the trucks to drive through San Luis Obispo

County. Even if these soils were not coming to our landfill, Main Street and Broadway are both California State Highways, providing the most direct route to Highway 101. Santa Maria has neither the control, nor the jurisdiction to prevent a truck from using these roads. However, because of its participation in this program, the city was able to negotiate a route that has resulted in the least impact to our community and significant benefits to portions of the county road system.

This program has been a win/win for our valley. We have utilized soils generated locally, for a beneficial re-use locally. Additionally, by accepting the soils from the Dunes, we are assuring the conservation of very sensitive habitat. It is true that Santa Maria benefits from revenue for accepting these soils. This revenue is paying for putting additional police officers on the streets without raising taxes. In addition, this program has allowed the city to keep fees at the landfill affordable.

The NHIS project has received substantial recognition and review throughout California, including the awarding of the prestigious Helen Putnam Award for Excellence, presented by the League of California Cities.

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