



VENTURA

## Environmental justice: Should gas compressor stay in low-income Ventura neighborhood?



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Published 6:00 a.m. PT March 24, 2022 | Updated 7:30 p.m. PT March 24, 2022

A major utility's plan to expand and modernize a century-old natural gas pressurizing station in west Ventura has raised several health and safety questions that have gone unanswered for a neighboring low-income community and elementary school.

But Southern California Gas Company's long-promised follow-up to its community forum in October could shed more light. Six public meetings are set for March 29 through April 2.

The California Public Utilities Commission, which has the ultimate say in whether any utility infrastructure of this type can be built or expanded in the city, must sign off any additional requirements it may impose following the public meetings.

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Some community and environmental activists feel momentum is on their side. They want to block the expansion because of concerns over local air quality, global climate change and neighborhood safety.

"There are risks in a highly concentrated, populated area in a disadvantaged community," said Matt Vespa, a senior attorney for legal nonprofit Earthjustice. "The problem is it's never really been looked at with any meaningful scrutiny."

Some elected officials just want to see the pressurizing station moved out of Ventura.

"That's critical," Ventura City Councilman Mike Johnson said. "That would be my No. 1 goal for my four years in office. If I could do that, I would die happy."

The compressor on the Westside's North Olive Street is in a residential neighborhood, directly across from the 91-year-old E.P. Foster Elementary School, named after a philanthropist who developed gas wells along the Ventura River.

The facility distributes natural gas for heat, hot water and other uses to over a quarter of a million homes, businesses and industries in Ventura and the Central Coast, according to SoCalGas' website.

SoCalGas, the nation's largest gas utility, wants to replace three gas compressors built in the 1980s with four new ones with more horsepower. The company also wants to rebuild an old warehouse and office building that are set for demolition.

At a Dec. 13 City Council goal-setting meeting, Mayor Sofia Rubalcava said relocating the facility was a top priority but acknowledged the city has little power to make that happen.

She said city officials should impress upon state utility regulators the importance of moving the gas compressor away from homes and schools.

"It's one of the things that is detrimental to the health and safety of our community members," Rubalcava said.

Ventura Unified School District mirrored the city's move, urging state agencies to review environmental, health and safety issues associated with the project, said Marieanne Quiroz, a district spokeswoman. The district has also retained consultant Rincon Associates to collect and test baseline air and dust samples around the elementary school, she said.

In early February, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution requesting the utilities commission and other state agencies take a closer look at the potential environmental and public safety impacts of the compressor.

Supervisor Matt LaVere, a former Ventura mayor who represents the predominantly Latino neighborhood, raised environmental justice issues, describing the community as "historically disadvantaged."

## **Community outreach**

In August, the utilities commission stopped SoCalGas from moving forward on construction after community opposition intensified. It asked the gas company to explain to the community its plans and other alternatives to the upgrade.

**ICYMI:** State agency orders SoCalGas to hit pause on Ventura gas compressor

"This public forum will meet the CPUC's request, and as instructed, SoCalGas will hold the public forum prior to any next steps in procurement or construction related to the modernization project," Marissa Girolamo, a company spokeswoman, said at the time.

In-person public forums are set for 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. March 31 and 10 a.m. April 2 at the Crowne Plaza Ventura Beach Hotel. Virtual meetings are scheduled for 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. on March 29 and on 3 p.m. April 2. Registration is required.

SoCalGas representatives will present a study of the compressor, including alternative locations and equipment configurations and take questions.

## **Change in trajectory**

At first, it seemed SoCalGas' plans would move forward without a hitch. The utilities commission, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control and the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District each gave their stamps of approval.

In its September 2019 approval, the commission cited the project's importance:

"Because we recognize the importance of the proposed projects and the role of compressor stations in maintaining operational reliability and safety of the gas transmission system, we find that it is prudent and reasonable to authorize the proposed projects and for SoCalGas to have the necessary funding to conduct these projects,"

The agency's approval required SoCalGas to "obtain all relevant local permits and be accountable and responsive to the community," said Terrie Prosper, a commission spokeswoman.

But last year, after months of community opposition, with the help of local activists like the Westside Clean Air Coalition and others, the commission ordered the gas company to halt facility improvements. The catalyst for activists was a 2017 NASA study that identified the compressor as a "super" emitter of methane, a climate-changing gas many times more potent than carbon dioxide.

SoCalGas officials said they have repaired the methane leaks from the station's metering equipment.

Vespa, of Earthjustice, said there was never a determination of whether the gas compressor was still needed or whether it could be relocated.

"To the extent compression continues to be needed, a community goal is to have it built elsewhere," Vespa said.

The issue has also caught the attention of state Sen. Monique Limón, D-Santa Barbara, and Assemblymember Steve Bennett, D-Ventura, who co-hosted a community meeting about the compressor in August. They have not taken a public position on the issue.

During that meeting, Ventura Unified School District Superintendent Roger Rice voiced his concerns about the project in part because of its proximity to the elementary school.

"From my perspective, relocating the facility is the only acceptable solution, and it's the right thing to do for our community," Rice said at the meeting.

## Early beginnings

The gas facility has had a long history in Ventura.

Between 1905 and 1919, the northern portion of the site operated as an oil refinery, according to the toxic substances control agency. In 1920, the plant was taken out of service and most of its structures and equipment were removed.

But years later, soil on the property was found to be potentially contaminated with cancer-causing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and other toxic agents.

SoCalGas has removed all but "residual" amounts of contaminated soil, agency records show. In March, the regulators determined that there is "no possibility" the remaining restoration work would have a significant environmental effect.

The natural gas compressor has been operating at the site since 1923, before homes and the elementary school were built in the area.

Tomás Rebecchi, who lives within two blocks of the compressor, said "the science wasn't there" when the homes and school were built. Times have changed, he said.

"We know so much more now. It should be made right," said Rebecchi, a local organizer for national nonprofit Food & Water Action, and a vociferous opponent of the SoCalGas project.

Rebecchi said the easiest option is for the gas company to move the compressor to another piece of land or simply shut it down because nearby residents don't have an option to move. He's also concerned about possible explosions at the site.

Rebecchi said there could be explosions caused by high-pressure pipelines such as what happened in San Bruno in 2010. The explosion in the Bay Area community killed eight people and injured nearly 60.

Late last year, Rebecchi was part of a larger group of activists demanding that Gov. Gavin Newsom stop the expansion of projects like the Ventura gas compressor and the Aliso Canyon natural gas storage facility in Porter Ranch, the site of the largest methane gas leak in U.S. history in 2015. The state utility commission, comprised of gubernatorial appointees, recently voted to allow the expansion of the Porter Ranch facility.

## Risk assessment

In 2011, the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District lowered the cancer risk assessment of pollution from the compressor from high to "less than significant" after the gas company added a catalytic oxidizer that made emissions of toxic acrolein less harmful.

The county air pollution control district has conducted in-person inspections of the gas compressor every year since 2019. The gas company also performs quarterly leak detection and repairs without the control district

present.

Keith Macias, an air district spokesman, said the gas company is required to perform the leak detection and repair reports every three months, a process that he called "rigorous." He said the procedure must be documented and cover all components of the facility. The reports, he said, must show the date of the discovery and the date of repair.

The county district is not present because "we do not have the resources," Macias said.

The county district handles all oil and gas facilities in a similar manner, he said.

The gas company reported it repaired 40 leaks that happened in 2018, 15 leaks in 2019, 28 leaks last year.

Despite the lowered risk assessment from the county, the opposition isn't dying down. Ultimately, activists who want the gas compressor project out of the city will continue to look at different ways to achieve that goal.

For one, the project doesn't meet the statewide goal of transitioning to renewable resources by 2045. They believe no gas compressor can be safe in this residential area and it doesn't meet climate goals.

And, for now, it appears many elected officials are behind them.

For more information on the March and April meetings, visit [socialgas.com/stay-safe/pipeline-and-storage-safety/ventura/community-meeting](https://socialgas.com/stay-safe/pipeline-and-storage-safety/ventura/community-meeting)

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