

MATTHEW HOY

AUGUST 6, 2016 9:16 PM

SLO County should weigh both the benefits and the risks of Phillips 66 rail spur



A proposal to expand production at the Phillips 66 refinery on the Nipomo Mesa has drawn the ire of some San Luis Obispo County residents. A protest was held at the County Government Center on Feb. 4, 2016. **David Middlecamp** - dmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com

BY MATTHEW HOY

Young children and environmentalists share a lot of the same qualities. With children, it's their blissful ignorance of all the work and money required to purchase food for the table, provide clothes they outgrow at an alarming rate and pay the mortgage to keep a roof over their heads.

Greens take immense pride in their zero-emission electric vehicles charged by smoke-spewing power plants and containing batteries consisting of metals strip-mined somewhere in China or the fact that the solar panels atop their home have reduced their electricity bills to zero (but still required them to be hooked up to the grid because otherwise they can't watch Stephen Colbert after sundown).

Over time, children can be taught that food doesn't magically appear free of charge from boxes in the wall like in so many "Star Trek" episodes.

Environmentalists are not so easily dissuaded from their beliefs that magical solar panels and windmills will save the planet.

Earlier this year, hundreds of opponents of Phillips 66's plan to build a rail spur to its Nipomo Mesa refinery attended a series of San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission hearings to [voice opposition](#) to the proposal that would allow approximately 150 trains to carry oil to the facility each year.

Concerns that failure to approve the plan may mean the loss of some jobs — even if it is as few as a dozen — are casually dismissed by activists who aren't concerned about other people's livelihoods.

The fact that California has some of the highest gas prices in the nation and that those prices spike any time something breaks down at one of the only 11 refineries left in the state also doesn't enter into foes' calculations.

The fact that rising gas prices tend to hit the poor and the diminishing number of middle-class households the hardest also isn't a concern.

No, opponents of the rail spur seem to be almost exclusively focused on the possibility that one of these oil trains will derail, explode and leave San Luis Obispo County resembling a post-apocalyptic wasteland out of the "Fallout" video games or the "Mad Max" movie series.

That such an accident will occur seems to them to be a metaphysical certainty, and no amount of planning, oversight, inspections or additional regulations will be sufficient to erase the horrors they've created in their minds.

Planning commissioners could require the railroad companies to increase the number and type of inspections on rail lines carrying crude oil cars — including walking inspections of the kind that might have caught broken lag bolts on the track that is believed to have resulted in the derailment of an oil train in [Mosier, Oregon](#), in June.

They could also require that the most modern and safest oil-carrying cars be used transporting crude to the Nipomo Mesa refinery.

Even in a worst-case scenario, very little of what might happen — the loss of human life excepted — is irreversible.

Oil spills occur on a too regular basis. But we have also built a lot of technology and expertise to clean up these messes when they happen.

That's why the Gulf Coast returned to being a tourist attraction just a couple of years after the [Deepwater Horizon](#) oil spill. That's why Santa Barbara isn't an abandoned wasteland where property can be purchased for pocket change, even after the [1969 spill](#) there that started the modern environmental movement.

There are reasonable requirements the county can impose on Phillips 66 and Union Pacific as conditions before approving the rail spur plan. Bowing to the will of an environmentalist cult that refuses to offer any weight to the benefits of the plan while painting the worst possible picture of the risks is not something responsible adults do.

It's something children do.

Conservative columnist Matthew Hoy is a former reporter, editor and page designer. His column appears in The Tribune every other Sunday, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fulks. Read Hoy's blog at Hoystory.com. Follow him on Twitter @Hoystory.

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Alan Thomas · Northwestern University

If environmentalists are like children, then thank God for the children who delivered us from the cesspool of toxic waste, air pollution and dirty water that nearly choked this country to death in the 1960s. If you are under 50 years old and take today's environment for granted, Google the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and get educated.

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David Claffardini

Google "Phillips 66 violations" for some interesting reading as to the company's track record regarding following laws and safety procedures. It's not a pretty picture.

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Russ Byler · Upper Management at Cathouse

Here comes that sky again. Next week something else will cause it to fall.

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Rodger Avalanchier · Morro Bay, California

Within the confines of his invented reality Mr. Hoy's pronouncements and conclusions make perfect sense. Hard to believe Hoy's column is not in the comic section.

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David Claffardini

Matt Hoy's premise is terribly flawed.

Based on Phillips 66 track record, we have plenty of reason to be skeptical that the company would operate the rail spur safely.

Google "Phillips 66 violations" and you will see exactly what I am talking about. Is this a corporation we want to trust with the health and safety of our children and our environment?

Is this a company that will foresake extra profit in order to insure public safety? Time after time Phillips 66 has shown that it will risk people and the environment and break laws in order to pad the bank accounts of the millionaires at the top of the corporation hierarchy. Why would it be any different this time around?

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David Claffardini

Kevin Rice And they shouldn't!

And one can only wonder how they will deal with trains when they enter Phillips 66 property. And with Phillips' long history of law violations and accidents, we can also wonder what kind of train companies would feel comfortable working with Phillips.

There is no doubt there are good employees working at Phillips--and they have my respect-- but if upper management can't steer the company within the bounds of the law, we all have good reason to be concerned when, what Kevin Rice calls the "oil bomb trains" are allowed to roll past schools and on into the local Phillips plant.

Google "Phillips 66 violations" and check out the facts and the horrifying record in dealing with fire and hazardous chemical safety. It's not a pretty picture and no wonder local firefighters are campaigning against this latest Phillips 66 venture on the Central Coast.

Like · Reply · Aug 9, 2016 3:26pm · Edited

David Claffardini

Contrary to Matt Hoy's outrageous and absurd propaganda piece, high gas prices in California have no correlation to this plan and whether it goes ahead or not will make absolutely NO difference to the price of gas.

Pricing of gasoline in California is so questionable and suspect it is continually being investigated by the government and consumer advocate agencies. Oil companies, no surprise, have not been particularly cooperative or forthcoming with facts or reasonable explanations.

Oh, and Hoy's claim that when the disasters happen, the damage is "reversible" is also laughable, especially w... See More

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Brad Snook · San Jose State University

The County doesn't regulate railroads, and they aren't legally permitted to regulate the railroad activities through our county. They don't have Staff that are trained to inspect track, and the County won't want to be held liable if something bad happens to the trains, the environment, people. A ridiculous and simplistic understanding, especially considering all the documentation available on the topic. Do more research, Matt

Like · Reply · Aug 8, 2016 7:01am

Russ Byler · Upper Management at Cathouse

So what you're saying is this whole discussion is academic? If the county has no regulatory powers over the railroad then UP can send as many trains as they want?

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Brad Snook · San Jose State University

Wow, Matt! It only took 2 years for the ecosystem to recover from the Deepwater Horizon disaster? What about recovery from the dispersant used, Corexit? What do working people do for 2 years, besides "lawyer up"? Now, regarding the Rail Spur, before writing on a topic, you should do more research. It's the "adult" thing to do. Plus, it's more professional.

Like · Reply · Aug 7, 2016 7:37pm

Alan Thomas · Northwestern University

What nonsense. Exactly how many miles of aging track would Phillips 66 be asked to inspect? The new trains coming are from hundreds of miles away. That's just goofy. Phillips would far better off just pulling the train project and spending the money to buy and fix the pipeline.

Like · Reply · 1 · Aug 6, 2016 11:15pm

Alan Thomas · Northwestern University

Kevin Rice And not very well considering the countless derailments

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David Claffardini

Kevin Rice Based on Phillips 66 track record, we have plenty of reason to be skeptical that the company would operate the rail spur safely.

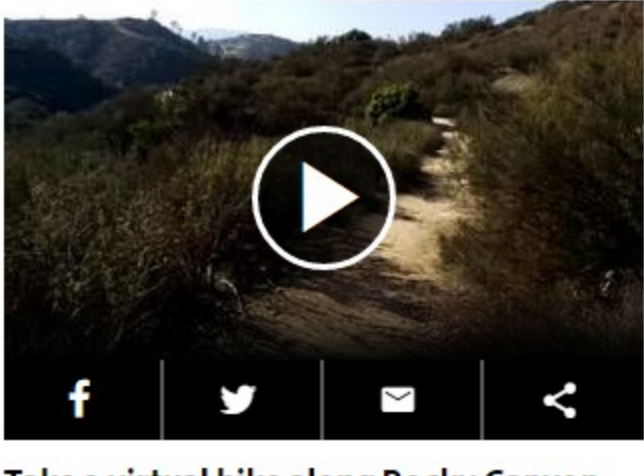
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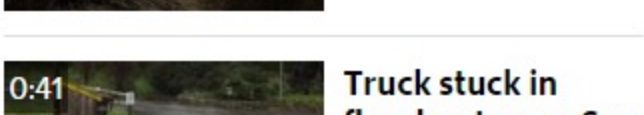
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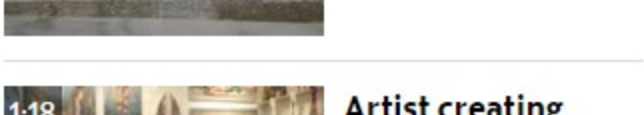
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ABOUT MATTHEW HOY



Matthew Hoy, a conservative, is a San Diego-area native and 1994 graduate of Cal Poly's journalism program. He spent 15 years at various newspapers along the West Coast, including The Lompoc Record, The Daily World in Aberdeen, Wash., The North County Times in Escondido and The San Diego Union-Tribune. For 15 years, Hoy has written a blog on politics and the media, Hoystory.com. Hoy's column will be published in The Tribune every other week, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fulks.

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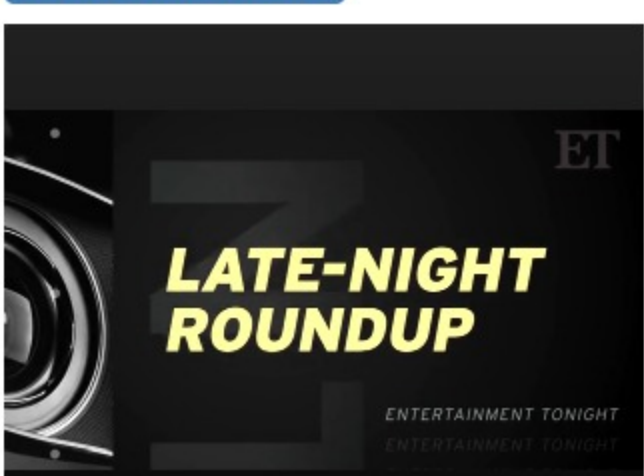
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