

Benicia: Planning commission hears testimony on Valero rail proposal

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BENICIA -- The Planning Commission on Thursday heard testimony from environmentalists, community members, union officials and refinery employees regarding Valero's proposal to bring crude in by rail.

Following two hours of public comments at a packed City Hall hearing, the commission took no action because planners said they need more time to respond to public comments.

Valero is proposing to ship up to 70,000 barrels a day of crude to its Benicia refinery by train. The refinery currently gets its crude by boat.

Supporters argued the project would create 30 permanent jobs and allow Valero to become more competitive in North American crude markets.

Opponents, however, including representatives of the National Resources Defense Council and **Communities for a Better Environment**, alleged the project would set the stage for Valero and other Bay Area refineries to import increased volumes of Canadian tar sands crude, regarded as more polluting as other crudes.

They also raised concerns about the safety of tank cars traveling through the Suisun Marsh as well as urban areas; and demanded a full-blown environmental impact report for the project.

Valero has not specified where it will get the oil it plans to ship, but has asserted it would not be significantly different from the types of crude it currently processes.

Commissioner Stephen Young asked if interstate commerce law would trump Valero's promise to schedule train crossings at times that would not impede industrial-park auto traffic. City officials said they need more time to research the question.

The commission continued the hearing until Aug. 8; Valero had requested a special meeting on Aug. 1 to decide the matter, but three commissioners said scheduling conflicts prevent them from attending that day. A fourth commissioner, Rod Sherry, a civil engineer, recused himself because he said he has worked on the project.

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