

City to require more bike racks at new, expanded buildings

By Antonie Boessenkool, staff writer
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Bicycle riders in Bakersfield may not have to look as far for a place to park their bikes once new requirements take effect in July for builders to install bike racks in more instances.

Currently, according to state code, builders must install bike racks for new buildings that are expected to have members of the public visit. That means, for example, that industrial buildings that likely wouldn't see foot traffic from the public wouldn't be required to install the racks. That requirement took effect in 2011.

But starting this July 1, bike racks also will be required for additions and alterations to buildings the public visits within certain parameters.

The Community Services Committee, one of the handful of standing committees of the Bakersfield City Council, met Thursday to incorporate the changes into the city code and clarify the new requirements for builders.

On July 1, bike parking will be required for additions or alterations of 2,000 square feet or more with an estimated construction cost or value of \$500,000 or more. On Jan. 1, 2014, the requirement will become even more stringent. Bike parking will be required for additions or alterations of 1,000 square feet or more with a value or cost of \$200,000 or more.

The number of bike racks is also set and depends on how many vehicle parking spaces are built or added. There has to be at least one bike parking space for every 20 vehicle parking spaces, or at least two bike parking spaces for additions and alterations that meet the threshold. That's in line with the current requirement for the ratio of bike parking spaces to vehicle parking spaces.

The Community Services Committee, made up of just two members at the moment, also approved guidelines for builders on what type of bike racks are acceptable, convenient and secure.

Single U-shaped racks, for example, are acceptable because riders can lock a wheel and the bike frame to the rack, whereas the traditional racks of vertical rails aren't acceptable.

City Councilman Bob Smith, founder of the nonprofit organization Bike Bakersfield, has been a longtime proponent of more bicycle lanes and increasing bike ridership locally. The standard upside-down W-shaped racks, common around Bakersfield, "don't work," Smith said, because they force riders to lock their bikes sideways, which is inconvenient and less secure.

"It'd be like having a car parking spot that was five foot by five foot and say, 'OK, park your car there,'" Smith said.

The hope with the new guidelines for builders is that increasing safety and convenience for riders will encourage people to bike more, he said.

"We make automobile travel very convenient. We take care of parking at either end. We take care of nice, wide streets all the way. We have standards so we encourage automobile travel," he said. "We should have the same standards that, if people so choose, that (bicycling) becomes a very convenient thing for them, instead of a difficult thing."

"We hope that bicycling will become more prevalent and more popular for many reasons, the price of gas and health benefits, said Jacquie Sullivan, the chair of the committee.

Because the committee's action Thursday was technically only a clarification rather than a change to city code, it doesn't need to be approved by the full city council.

The third seat on the committee is empty, to be filled by the yet-to-be-elected Ward 1 council member.

Report sees economic benefits from 'fracking' in Monterey Shale

By John Cox, staff writer
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A new study predicts that the Monterey Shale oil formation underlying much of the southern Central Valley will fuel substantial economic growth in California for years to come -- assuming continued use of the controversial but effective technique known as hydraulic fracturing.

Basing some of their conclusions on the energy boom under way in North Dakota and other states, University of Southern California researchers projected that developing the Monterey will add nearly 3 million jobs and close to \$25 billion in tax revenues by 2020.

There will be challenges to address along the way, from heavy demands on local roads and public services to potential water and air pollution as oil producers bring to bear technologies such as hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," according to the study released this week.

The report is sure to stoke hopes that Kern County is literally sitting on a petroleum treasure trove, even as some members of the local oil industry continue to harbor doubts that the Monterey will ever yield the 15 billion barrels of oil that the federal government has estimated exist there.

"This is not the final word, but it just indicates clearly that there could be a real uptick for California," said Jack Cox, president of The Communications Institute, a nonprofit public policy research and education nonprofit that helped USC economists and engineers with the study.

Among the report's projections: California's per-capita economic activity will increase by at least \$10,000 over the next seven years thanks to the oil production in the Monterey. That's 14 percent more gross domestic product per person than would exist without work in the Monterey.

Developing the Monterey -- a deep and geologically diverse "source rock" thought to be the largest deposit of its kind in the country -- would also greatly reduce California's heavy reliance on imported oil, the report says.

The study was funded in part by a grant from the oil trade group Western States Petroleum Association, which advocates in favor of fracking in the Monterey and elsewhere.

The report's release comes as state regulators are working on new rules specific to fracking. While environmentalists push for a ban on the practice, or at least strict new safeguards, the oil industry maintains that the technique is safe and economically vital.

According to the report, its purpose is "to conduct an objective and economically sound assessment of the net benefits and costs of the increased use of hydraulic fracturing in California, especially with regard to the production of oil from the state's Monterey Shale formation."

Economists from USC's Price School of Public Policy created the model on which much of the study was based. The university's Viterbi School of Engineering also contributed by developing a scenario for how the Monterey will likely be developed by the oil industry.

Last year, a report issued by a Wall Street research team cast doubt about the Monterey's potential for oil production.

Titled "The Mystery of the Missing Monterey Shale," the report by an analyst with global asset management firm AllianceBernstein stated that oil production in California has remained flat despite increasing investment in the Monterey. It discussed possible reasons for the formation's underperformance, including its abundance of natural faults, low reservoir pressure and a geological profile somewhat resistant to fracking.

Locally, opinions on the Monterey are mixed, with some oil executives saying it's only a matter of time and engineering before production along the formation booms. Others wonder whether the formation's geology is too complex for wide-scale production, and whether the "source rock" still contains large petroleum deposits after more than 100 years of drilling in the region.

Oil industry sits back at fracking workshop

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thurs., March 14, 2013

For a while it looked like the oil industry was just going to sit there and take it from the environmentalists. And for several hours in Bakersfield Wednesday, that's exactly what happened.

Representatives of the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity hammered away at the state's proposed rules for regulating the oil field technique known hydraulic fracturing. They called for additional safeguards, tougher penalties for violations and closer state oversight.

Not until almost the end of the state-sponsored "fracking" workshop did anyone from the industry speak up. When they finally did, about three hours into the workshop at the Four Points by Sheraton, the industry's comments were short on specifics and long on caution.

Industry spokesmen told visiting officials from the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources and its parent agency, the Department of Conservation, that oil and gas production is a big job engine and generator of tax revenues. All of that could be jeopardized, they warned, by unreasonable regulations on fracking.

"It would be tragic if the communities that have suffered under a cloud of economic malaise and anemic public services for far too long are denied the opportunity to grow and prosper because decision makers who neither live here nor understand our economic situation are allowed to prevent the beneficial use of a safe and proven technology," said Michael Turnipseed, executive director of the Kern County Taxpayers Association.

Similar concerns were voiced by three industry groups and four oil company representatives.

That's it, then? Nothing more than a plea to spare Kern County's main economic pillar?

Not exactly. As trade group representatives confided before and during the event, they plan to hold their peace until the state enters a formal rulemaking process in April or May. That's when they plan to get specific about proposed fracking rules.

What that meant Wednesday was that environmentalists took repeated shots at a controversial but highly effective technology -- and no one fired back.

Fracking injects sand, large amounts of water and small concentrations of sometimes-toxic chemicals underground at high pressure to break up rock formations and release oil and natural gas. Credited with opening access to vast petroleum reserves in other states, it has been done in western Kern County for decades without reports of groundwater contamination.

In front of an audience of about 50 people, most of them from Kern's oil industry, Sierra Club fracking expert Tom Williams, two lawyers from the Center for Biological Diversity and Santa Paula resident Marianne Ratcliff asked state officials to strengthen -- and in no case weaken -- draft rules released in December.

They asked for several measures not envisioned in the draft rules, such as baseline water sampling and seismic testing before and after frack jobs.

They recommended tougher cementing requirements to ensure that the high pressures associated with fracking do not end up rupturing well casings and allow toxins to seep into nearby groundwater.

They requested pre-fracking disclosure of the chemicals injected underground, not 60 days afterward, as the state has proposed.

Ratcliff, touching on one of the California fracking debate's most sensitive issues, asked that the state simply forbid the use of any chemicals that the industry refuses to identify on the grounds that their disclosure would violate the California Uniform Trade Secrets Act.

At times the comments got pointed. Ratcliff accused industry players of "cutting corners" on environmental rules. Other speakers seemed to imply that state regulators had grown too cozy with the industry.

Such words prompted a heated response by the director of the Department of Conservation, Mark Nechodom, a trained scientist. Uttering the meeting's very last words, he said he "took umbrage" at suggestions that his agency was anything less than independent.

Nechodom emphasized that the proposed rules were not intended to be onerous for oil companies, but neither were they "meant to make profits for the oil and gas industry."

More fracking workshops are expected to take place soon in Monterey, Santa Barbara and Sacramento.

Better air quality, fewer wood-burning bans this winter

Sierra Star, Thursday, March 14, 2013

Dramatically improved air quality in the Valley air basin this winter resulted in fewer residential wood-burning curtailments than during the previous "Check Before You Burn" season.

The annual wintertime program that reduces dangerous particle pollution ended its 10th season Feb. 28. During the 2012-2013 season, there were 187 "No Burn Days" district-wide (San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley portion of Kern counties). This compares to 381 "No Burn Days" during the 2011-2012 season, representing a decrease of more than 50% Valley-wide.

In Madera County, there were only six prohibitions compared to 41 in the 2011-2012 year. There were also 24 notices of violation compared to 54 in the 2011-12 year.

There were just three days during this winter when air quality was "unhealthy" in any county, compared to 41 such days last winter. Also, the number of days when air quality was rated "unhealthy for sensitive groups" decreased by 54% over last winter.

Check Before You Burn, which curtails residential wood burning when air quality deteriorates in order to prevent build-up of fine-particulate matter (PM2.5), is the district's single most-successful and cost-effective regulation. Since it was adopted in 2003, the air basin has seen dramatic improvements to winter air quality, when residential wood burning is the largest single source of PM2.5.

PM2.5 -- small particles of soot, ash and other airborne material -- is a harmful form of air pollution that is linked to chronic lung disease, respiratory illness, heart attacks and premature death. One Valley-wide curtailment results in air-pollution reductions equivalent to taking 140,000 trucks off the road.

Each day at 4:30 p.m., the district issues wood-burning forecasts for each of the air basin's eight counties beginning at midnight for the following 24 hours. Forecasts are derived through analyzing many factors, including meteorology, expected emissions, atmospheric patterns and other variables.

Forecasts are available through many means, including:

- ★ The toll-free forecast number, 1-800-466-7763.
- ★ valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm.
- ★ Automated emails: valleyair.org/lists/list.htm.