

**NEWS**

Coalition wants Fresno to engage community on industrial processes

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A coalition of neighborhood, environmental and health organizations are asking the city of Fresno leaders to engage community members as the city conducts work on environmental impact reports for the general plan and a south industrial area specific plan.

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The letter, dated Monday, is addressed to the Fresno City Council and signed by seven organizations: Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability, Friends of Calwa, Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, Communities for a New California Education Fund, Central California Asthma Collaborative and the Central California Environmental Justice Alliance.

The letter outlines areas the coalition would like to see addressed in the EIRs, such as population and housing, transportation, public services and recreation, air quality, noise and utilities and service systems.

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The council on Thursday is scheduled to vote on two contracts, each costing about \$500,000, proposed by the city's development and resource management department (DARM).

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The contracts initially were placed on the council's consent agenda, which groups multiple items together for one vote. Earlier this week, the contracts were moved to afternoon hearings, where they'll be discussed separately.

One contract is with the Fresno office of LSA Associates, Inc. to update the city's general plan environmental impact report, adopted in 2014.

A city staff report notes the California Environmental Quality Act requires the EIR be updated every five years. Updating the EIR reduces the city's risk of legal challenges and streamlines development, the staff report says.

The other contract is to conduct an EIR on a south industrial area specific plan, which will analyze zoning and development conditions.

The proposed contract is with Ascent Environmental, Inc., which a city staff report notes "... has produced more than a dozen legally defensible documents that have withstood legal challenge and appeals through the California Supreme Court with a success rate of 87 percent."

The firm also worked for the city on the mitigated negative declaration to relocate the Darling, Inc. meat rendering plant.

Jennifer Clark, the DARM director pointed out the agenda items are to hire consultants, and the EIRs will go through a full and thorough analysis to comply with CEQA.

"We agree that there will be a lot of public comment," Clark said in an email through a city spokesman. "Both EIRs will have full and complete public processes including scoping meetings, public review periods, and response to comments."

Coalition members are not aware of any industrial area specific plan draft available to the public, and the city can't analyze the impacts of a plan that doesn't exist, the letter reads. Clark called the plan new and said it will assess land uses already planned and identified in the general plan.

The general plan EIR won't change the general plan, but will update technical studies to reflect current conditions and future impacts, Clark said.

The coalition ask the city in the letter to engage the public, particularly neighborhoods near the designated south industrial area, such as southwest Fresno, Calwa, Malaga, Daleville, the Flamingo Mobile Home Park, and residents who live along Malaga Avenue.

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The letter questions the name of the industrial area specific plan, saying it ignores neighborhoods with names, needs and unique characteristics.

The letter says the plans could potentially greatly affect “... public health, housing stability, community well-being, and access to opportunity in some of the state’s most pollution-burdened communities as well as the City of Fresno as a whole and the Fresno County region.”

Councilman Garry Bredefeld, who represents District 6 in northeast Fresno, said the city is following the EIR process, and there will be many opportunities for public comment.

“Along the way, people will have every opportunity, and many opportunities to address their concerns,” he said. “And I want to hear their concerns.”

The city has a rocky history with residents affected by industry.

The city currently is fighting a legal battle with Leadership Counsel, which is representing a group of southwest Fresno residents who live near a site the city approved for an industrial park. The California Attorney General intervened in that case, which is ongoing.

Perhaps the most notorious instance of industry polluting a Fresno neighborhood is the Darling Ingredients meat rendering plant. The city and Darling in 2012 were subject to a lawsuit filed by a group of citizens. A deal was struck to relocate the plant, but the new potential neighbors also sued.

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