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Close the gas facility

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Santa Monica Daily Press

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There are strange times indeed, and the employees of this City are working harder than ever to serve the community during this crisis both through our customary job duties and as emergency operations employees. While many of us are shut inside our homes, many others of us are on the front lines serving citizens and keeping them safe and running smoothly. We clearly see and feel the consequences brought on by measures taken to protect the public from this pandemic. Nothing is happening as usual, and at this moment, we must suggest forth. Management business as usual can never happen again. The Council is looking at tough choices as you consider balancing the upcoming FY budget. We know you take on that task with a heavy heart. We also ask that you take on this task with a return to our values. Over the next two weeks, the City management team will finalize and then present to you plans that will have irreversible and draconian impacts. These plans have not been developed with the involvement of employees, the bargaining units or the Conditions Leadership. The first



information shared with the Bargaining Unit president was at a meeting on Monday afternoon and it was almost completely devoid of detail. This means come on the back of a rushed and hastily implemented plan that will leave our employees who work here in the lurch. Most of those impacted among the City's lower paid workforce and staff will be in a precarious financial position. We will be in a precarious position with the City's employees who are your most valuable asset and they are willing and able to get creative to find better solutions. To sidestep them in this process is to deny yourselves the single greatest source of intelligence, creativity, drive, and passion you have; that make this City government the envy of every other City in California. You have approved an emergency ordinance that suspends the usual civil service rules and protections. This concerns us greatly and we hope the

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It's time to close the Playa Del Rey gas storage facility. Here's what officials must do next.

When a gas well at the Aliso Canyon underground storage facility

exploded in the winter of 2015, it made news for the massive climate impact it created: irreversible emissions equivalent to burning nearly a billion gallons of gasoline—enough to essentially wipe out a year of climate progress in one fell swoop. The human toll has continued to this day, years after the well has been repaired.

The disaster forced thousands of Los Angeles residents to evacuate their homes, many of whom suffered from headaches, nausea, nosebleeds, dizziness and stomach aches. Some Angelenos have alleged that benzene released from the poisonous gas wells caused cancer.

We have worked to protect communities by advocating an end to new injections at Aliso Canyon, and for a regulatory roadmap to close the facility altogether. But five years later, Aliso Canyon remains perfectly operational—and thanks to lax regulation and distracted leadership, Los Angeles is now in imminent danger of another blowout.

This time, the health consequences could be even more catastrophic.

The gas storage facility at Playa Del Rey is a ticking time bomb. More than half a million people live within a 5-mile radius of the facility, which includes gas wells that were drilled, on average, more than 85 years ago—nearly twenty years older than the well that exploded at Aliso Canyon. Local leaders, including Mayor Eric Garcetti, have called for the eventual closure of the facility. But for the frontline communities in harm's way, the shuttering of these facilities cannot come soon enough.

Unfortunately, this is not an issue Los Angeles can address on its own. Shutting down Playa Del Rey hinges on Governor Newsom's implementation of a comprehensive strategy to transition away from dangerous natural gas and toward clean, safe sources of energy.

To support the closure of dangerous gas storage facilities—and a healthier, safer future for Southern California communities—state leaders should immediately pursue the following solutions:

First, regulators at the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) assessing the feasibility of closing Aliso Canyon should expand their inquiry to include Playa Del Rey. There are four gas



storage facilities serving the metropolitan Los Angeles region. As SoCalGas has explained in regulatory documents, they are part of an “integrated system,” which dynamically balances supply and demand as a whole. Therefore, reducing and ultimately eliminating our usage of one facility bears on our ability to do the same for another.

Second, the State should accelerate investment in healthier, more resilient infrastructure like renewables, demand-side solutions, and long-duration battery storage. There is promising precedent for such a strategy: in the aftermath of the Aliso Canyon blowout, Governor Brown ordered an accelerated storage procurement, which successfully brought more than 70 megawatts of storage online in less than six months. At the same time, we must incentivize the electrification of our homes and buildings. Supporting household upgrades to highly-efficient appliances for heating and cooking is a no-brainer: it creates good-paying jobs doing construction and electrical work, and it makes homes safer by eliminating the indoor air pollutants caused by the combustion of natural gas.

Finally, California must articulate a cohesive roadmap for transitioning away from risky, superfluous gas infrastructure. Los Angeles provides an instructive model, having recently procured reliably clean power from a solar and storage project at a price that outcompeted natural gas. And the City just issued a bold new plan to create thousands of new jobs transitioning affordably to 100% clean energy by 2035. Unbelievably though, in recent months, regulators at the CPUC have gone in the opposite direction, opening the door to new gas contracts, which would increase the kind of risks we face at Playa Del Rey for decades to come.

Advocates for fossil fuel infrastructure argue it is more reliable. But storage facilities prone to dangerous explosions and their resulting service disruptions strain the meaning of reliability. We have all the technology we need to reliably close Playa Del Rey. Recent experience shows that doing so will create economic growth, good jobs, and healthier communities. Now we need the right leadership to get us there.

Jake Levine is an attorney in Los Angeles. He served as Senior Counsel to State Senator Fran Pavley and as a climate aide to President Obama. V. John White is Executive Director of The Center

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