

Environmental group launches local campaign

By Seth Nidever

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A San Francisco-based environmental organization with a new presence in Hanford chose Wednesday to launch a campaign for more environmental activism in Kings County.

Greenaction, whose involvement in Kings County dates back to an early-1990s fight over a proposed hazardous waste incinerator at the Chem Waste property near Kettleman City, kicked off its stepped-up local efforts with a noon press conference inside the organization's one-room office at 130 E. Eighth St.

Greenaction Director Bradley Angel discussed the group's concerns about several local projects, among them a proposed expansion to hazardous waste disposal operations near Kettleman City, a tire crumb melting plant being built on Hanford-Armona Road east of Highway 43 and a corn ethanol plant slated for south Hanford.

In attendance were leaders from People for Clean Air and Water, a Kettleman City group that has long opposed the Chemical Waste Management Inc. hazardous waste disposal site southwest of town; members of Struggle for Health and Environmental Justice, a new Avenal entity formed out of concerns about a municipal trash landfill near that city; and representatives from Hanford Environmental Awareness Team (HEAT), a group that has raised questions about the tire crumb melting plant.

"We both have environmental justice in mind," said Robin Mattos, a member of HEAT who attended the meeting.



"I think that as far as environmental issues are concerned, there should be a place where people can stop by and drop in," Mattos said.

"It's just that we don't know our rights, and people like this are going to tell us what we can do," said Hanford resident Andre Booker.

Bill Zumwalt, Kings County planning director, meets with members of the community and Greenaction Wednesday afternoon. (Apolinar Fonseca/The Sentinel)

Questions focused on the Modular Rubber Drains tire crumb melting plant already under construction on Hanford-Armona Road.

Booker said he lives downwind of the proposed ethanol plant location and is concerned about emissions.

At 1:15 p.m., Angel voiced some of those concerns at a meeting with Bill Zumwalt, Chuck Kinney and Jerry James, all of the Kings County Planning Agency.

The facility, approved March 6 without public input, will churn out rubber drains and sidewalks by melting tire crumbs and pieces of plastic in a process company officials and San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials say won't create air pollution.

The plant was proposed last year for the Kings Industrial Park inside Hanford's city limits, but it ran into opposition.

Local concern peaked in November with HEAT members, backed by Greenaction, challenging the no-emissions claims and calling for more public scrutiny.

The city eventually rescinded the project's conditional use permit because neighbors hadn't been notified properly.

Under county rules, public notification of the project wasn't required, Zumwalt said.

Zumwalt said local agencies, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, approved the project.

"There's a lot of review that goes into these projects," Zumwalt said.

The process -- called site plan review -- allows county planners to get input from other agencies and make the decision to approve or disapprove without notifying the planning commission or the board of supervisors.

Conditional use permits -- a higher level of scrutiny -- must be approved by the planning commission and can be rescinded by the county's elected board of supervisors.

Projects involving a potentially greater environmental threat must go through an extensive environmental impact report before they can be approved.

Greenaction wants the Kings County Planning Commission to change the zoning rules so site plan reviews get bumped up to conditional use permit status.

The group plans to raise the issue at the planning commission's next meeting, scheduled for Sept. 10 at 7 p.m. in board chambers at the Kings County Government Center, 1400 W. Lacey Blvd.

"We just don't want backroom deals, people not being notified," Angel said.

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