What Comes Next?

Envisioning the Future of Oil Sites in Los Angeles

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10 April 2023

Abstract

The city and county of Los Angeles are currently planning the phaseout of oil and gas drilling in the region after passing ordinances that declare oil and gas drilling non-conforming land uses within their jurisdictions. The goal of this study is to understand what community leaders and activists who have been involved in this issue think about how the phaseout should occur, particularly in terms of cleanup, ownership and use of land, and how communities living near oil sites should be able to participate in the closure and redevelopment of the site in their neighborhood.

To understand their goals and visions, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of several months. The main findings from these interviews is that regulatory agencies need to ensure that oil operators are paying for the thorough cleanup of sites and that resident engagement is critical in determining a new land use that prioritizes serving community needs. While there are a number of ways that both the local and state governments can change to better serve these needs, the study highlights investment in regulatory enforcement, high levels of community engagement around potential land uses, and collaboration between government and community-based organizations as some of the best ways to accomplish these goals.

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Personal Statement

This project would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the many people in Los Angeles who have been working for years to end oil drilling in Los Angeles, in particular the STAND-LA coalition which has fought for a decade for this ordinance to pass. I feel very lucky to have been able to listen and learn from my participants and I am also incredibly grateful for Professor Shamasunder who has guided me through this study with invaluable advice and encouragement. To anyone in my life who has supported me throughout this past year, it has meant so much to me.

Introduction

After over a decade of organizing efforts, the Los Angeles City Council has voted to completely phase out the drilling of oil and gas within city limits by declaring oil and gas drilling a nonconforming land use and requiring all existing oil sites to cease operations within twenty years (Smith 2022). This legislative action is a testament to the long fought campaign by the STAND-LA (Stand Together Against Neighborhood Drilling - Los Angeles) coalition which centered the negative health impacts that many Los Angeles residents, particularly low-income BIPOC communities, have experienced because of their proximity to oil drilling (*Oil Drilling in Los Angeles* 2016). Moreover, this move comes at a time of increased interest nationally and globally into finding ways to transition away from fossil fuel extraction and towards a cleaner, more sustainable economy to combat the climate crisis. In Los Angeles, many prominent climate organizations in the region, including the National Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club, publicly backed STAND-LA ("Supporters & Allies n.d.). This phase of the campaign culminated in December 2022, when the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously in favor of a complete phaseout of oil and gas drilling and the mayor signed the ordinance into law (Smith 2022).

Now that the legislation has passed through the City Council, it raises questions about its implementation and next steps. This study focuses on understanding community goals and visions for the phaseout process through interviews with community leaders and organizers from key organizations that have been a part of the campaign to win this legislation. This study will learn what people, who work with the frontline communities that have been most impacted by oil drilling in LA, think about in terms of the cleanup, ownership, use, and community involvement in the redevelopment of oil sites in their neighborhoods. These are all critical components in the

redevelopment process and could potentially cause significant shifts in the environment of a neighborhood. Moreover, the impact of this legislation is that 26 oil and gas fields will eventually close and their land will be available for another use. This land can either be redeveloped by the people who historically have had power in land development, such as city officials and developers, or there could be a concerted effort to integrate the wishes and goals of community members in terms of spaces and uses that they would be interested in seeing built in their neighborhoods.

Learning the priorities of community organizers and leaders in terms of what could happen with the closure of the oil sites in the city is important data for the city to have as they plan this phase out. While the city should hear directly from community members living near oil sites, this study provides an account of the opinions of community leaders that is analyzed in an academic manner which can be used as a source of organized community knowledge. Additionally, community-based organizations can use these findings to advocate for their goals around clean-up, redevelopment, and community involvement to the city as many of their voices are compiled in this one study. This research is rooted in the principle that frontline community knowledge and interests around land redevelopment matters because they have been living with the consequences of neighborhood oil drilling, understand their neighborhood and its needs in a meaningful and personal way, and they will live with the repercussions of how this phaseout is put into practice (Corburn 2002).

This paper begins with an exploration of the historical context of oil in Los Angeles and community organizing against oil drilling both in the past and present. That is followed by a review of the literature around the health impacts of oil sites, different well statuses, site cleanup, and community engagement in land-use decision making. The methods section describes the

Background

stronger contracts with better working conditions and more efficient methods of extraction with varying levels of success (Quam-Wickham 1998). Both residents and workers often turned to local and state governments for support in regulating the oil industry to better protect their health and the environment. The industry responded to the government's restrictions on drilling with criticisms of government interference and an investment in a political lobbying arm that would grow in prominence at the state level by the early 1930s (Quam-Wickham 1998). These different avenues of reform advocacy utilized by local residents underscores the public pushback against oil drilling in the Los Angeles area that has been present since the initial stages of the industry's development.

The Present Day Struggle to End Oil Drilling

The fight to end oil drilling in Los Angeles in the 21st century is rooted in the evolution of these original concerns, with the same community-driven efforts as were seen a century ago. Los Angeles is currently the largest urban oil field in the country and many communities in the city experience negative health impacts from oil and gas drilling (Sadd and Shamasunder 2015). At the same time, this is in particular an issue of environmental injustice because 72.9% of people living near an oil production facility in the city of LA are people of color and 44.5% of people living near oil production are below 200% of the poverty level (Sadd and Shamasunder 2015). Moreover, many of these communities of color are more vulnerable to increased risk from other health impacts from air pollution and other environmental hazards, contributing to an increased cumulative burden when their exposure to oil sites is factored in as well (Sadd & Shamasunder 2015).

The modern-day campaign to cease the production of oil and gas drilling in LA began in late 2010 with the effort to close the Allenco site in the University Park neighborhood in South

Literature Review

The following literature review will explain the present circumstances in which Los Angeles is preparing to phase out oil and gas drilling. As described in the background section, campaigns for the end of drilling have been part of the disputes around the oil industry since the 1920s. The latest iteration of this campaign, spearheaded by the STAND-LA coalition, was focused on an environmental justice and public health message that called for the end of neighborhood oil drilling in LA as a way to protect the health of frontline communities who are predominantly low-income and BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color). Although the Los Angeles City Council's decision to phase out is a tremendous victory for STAND-LA and their allies, the next phase of this process brings with it new challenges. In particular, what will happen with the land of current sites of oil and gas drilling? How will the city mandate the cleanup of this land and who will be responsible for ensuring it is cleaned to a safe level? Moreover, after the land is ready for a new use it is imperative to think about who will have the resources and the ability to purchase the land and redevelop it. These are complex, multi-faceted questions and this literature review attempts to build the political and legal context for how these uncertainties might be addressed. The review begins with an explanation of the health impacts of oil drilling and how in particular, it is an issue of environmental injustice in Los Angeles. Then, the process of closing an oil site and potential complications are discussed. The review ends with an investigation of community engagement in land-use decision making.

Health Impacts of Living Near Oil Drilling

The STAND-LA campaign to end oil drilling in Los Angeles was framed as a community response to the health impacts of living near oil sites ("About Us" n.d.). This argument is

health. In 2017, a literature review of this subject was compiled by Nicole Wong for use by STAND-LA. The findings suggest that if a household is within 1,500 ft of an active oil well then the health impacts are much greater than households at a farther distance. However, toxic chemical presence and health imp

Environmental Racism in Oil Drilling in LA

While oil drilling is pervasive across this state and throughout the city of Los Angeles, the distribution of wells, their activity, and their impact is not evenly felt by residents. Many people do not know that Los Angeles is the largest urban oilfield in the country, with 68 oil fields in

The term plugged and abandoned is used to describe a well that has been cleaned and sealed. In California, the California Geologic Energy Management Divi

evidence that idle wells, while not active, can still have detrimental impacts on the neighborhood near the well site and need to be addressed within the phaseout process.

Orphan Wells

One form of an abandoned well is an orphan well, which is an unplugged abandoned well that has no solvent owner, making it a ward of the state. Oil well owners are required by California law to pay for a bond before beginning operations with the well as a way to ensure that there is money available for the eventual decommissioning of the well. However, this money is often not enough to pay the full price of plugging and abandoning a well (Boomhower, Shybut, and DeCillis 2018). An insolvent owner is one that cannot pay for the price of abandonment and the bond money does not cover it fully, making the state responsible for the funding of the well closure. Most of California's orphan wells are onshore wells, making this a more pressing concern for Los Angeles officials who must tackle the closure of both orphan wells and currently active wells in the coming years (Boomhower, Shybut, and DeCillis 2018).

also stated that CalGEM has spent approximately $2 million on 11 deserted wells, which would put the price of one decommissioning process at $181,818 per well, around $70,000 more than

of the affluent society" (Arnstein 1969). However, not all citizen participation gives citizens effective power which is demonstrated by the use of a ladder framework that lists citizen control, delegated power, and partnership at the top of the ladder and manipulation and therapy at the bottom. In the middle in the category of degrees of tokenism from bottom to top is informing, consulting, and placating (Arnstein 1969). These categories are crucial to consider when discussing citizen participation so that there is a more nuanced understanding of how the kind of participation is affecting the capability of the citizens to add or change the topic of discussion. For instance, in land redevelopment citizen control could look like full community ownership of land and discretion about its use. On the other hand, informing or consultation could simply suggest neighborhood meetings with the new owners about their plans but no requirement that their input is considered and addressed. This research project will consider how different communities in LA would like to participate in the redevelopment process and how these tools of citizen participation can engage community members in the manner that they prefer.

One reason that community members might struggle to participate in land-use decision making is in the difference between local and authoritative knowledge. In this framework, knowledge encompasses "perceptions, experiences, and values" of either the residents living near the contested site or those individuals participating in the redevelopment as part of their role with the government, a developer, or another outside stakeholder (Lehigh, Wells, and Diaz 2020). In the case of oil sites, there is the potential for a considerable distance between local and authoritative knowledge because of the many regulations that are necessary to consult in the cleanup and selling of the land. It is a complex and nuanced process that many residents will not understand, and their ability to participate could be compromised if there is not a concerted effort to bridge the knowledge gap. If the gap is not tackled as an issue then the priorities of

and community focus (“About Us” n.d.”). This reflects the values and priorities of other campaigns that fall within the environmental justice movement, which strives to alleviate the disproportionate burden of environmental harm and toxic exposure that low-income communities and communities of color face (Corburn 2017). Some methods used by environmental justice campaigns include recording both the past and present discriminatory practices, utilizing community-engaged research, and including measures of cumulative impact that demonstrate how low-income communities and communities of color experience a multitude of exposures and pressures that work in combination with each other (Corburn 2017). Each of these approaches was employed by the STAND-LA coalition, meaning that their campaign to end oil drilling used an environmental justice framing which is an important aspect to recognize because it situates the campaign within a broader movement. Understanding the fight to end oil drilling in Los Angeles as an environmental justice cause creates a specific framing for thinking about site closures and redevelopment.

This review focused on the two main topics of oil sites and community participation because this study connects these issues while thinking about the future of oil sites in Los Angeles. Delving into topics such as land ownership, clean-up, and community participation in this review was geared towards creating an understanding of the challenges that both the city and its residents will face in the implementation of the oil and gas drilling phaseout. There are many competing interests and visions for how this phaseout could occur and this research builds a narrative for who impacted frontline communities are in Los Angeles and how community engagement can be pursued around land use decision-making.

Chart 1: List of Participants and their Job Title

Name of Participant	Role in Organization	STAND Member Organization
Participant 1 (did not disclose name)	Staff at Communities for a Better Environment	Yes
Alex Size	Southern California Conservation Director at the Trust for Public Land	No
Andrés Gonzalez	Program Manager for Environmental Justice at Liberty Hill	Yes (Strategic Partner)
Ashley Hernandez	Wilmington Youth Organizer at Communities for a Better Environment	Yes
Damon Nagami	Senior Attorney in the Nature Program and Director of the Southern California Ecosystems Project at the National Resources Defense Council	No
Hugo Garcia	Campaign Coordinator for Environmental Justice for Esperanza Community Housing	Yes
John Fleming	Senior Scientist at the Climate Law Institute at the Center for Biological Diversity	No
Maro Kakoussian	Climate Justice Organizing Manager at Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles	Yes
Michele Pritchard	Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives at the Liberty Hill Foundation	Yes (Strategic Partner)
Nicole Levin	Campaign Representative for the Beyond Dirty Fuels Campaign for the Sierra Club	No

“They're [oil operators] not goin

phaseout policy. For instance, Andrés Gonzalez argued that, “I always really lean towards the oil companies and the ones who have extracted it to take on the cost. But I would also say that it is on the landlord to also own up to some of these costs, especially when they've been reaping profits” (Gonzalez 2023). This comment started in alignment with the polluter pays principle, however the second part shows some hesitation that other actors might also be involved in paying for the cleanup. On the other hand, Maro Kakoussian said that, “My opinion would be that the oil operator, the one that’s causing the harm, is responsible for cleaning up the harm”

pressuring the Archdiocese or another owner to sell or reuse the land in a way that benefits the community. Alex Size acknowledged that although the property owner has the legal right to determine the new use of the land or who they might sell the land to, one of the most effective

Chart 3: Ideas for Redevelopment of Sites

Community Land Trusts	“That’s w

coalition members and allies have been working towards for approximately a decade. Now, they have the opportunity to build something beneficial and wanted by the community in the place of a site that has caused significant harm.

Envisioning Reparations and Rematriation in Redevelopment

Some also spoke about broader themes of reparations, rematriation, and justice in thinking about how this land should be treated post-cleanup. Andrés Gonzalez discussed including both reparations and repatriation in thinking about the land in his response: “I would love to see a process where some type of exchange of those harms is undone…rematriation isn’t talking about the return of something, it’s talking about the return of a relationship” (Gonzalez 2023). One of the examples of rematriation he provided is a Land Trust, which is discussed later as a community-centered ownership model. In a similar vein, Maro Kakoussian argued that, “When we talk about reparations…addressing the roots of the causes of climate change…then that means looking at what the best use of this land can be for the community that's living around it” (Kakoussian 2023). These ideas suggested that in the minds of some of the participants, these oil sites in LA represent a history of environmental racism and that creating community uses of land is a part of repairing these harms.

Discussions like this have placed the STAND-LA coalition within the broader environmental justice movement. It is important to recognize the connections between specific campaigns and larger movements because organizers and activists, such as these participants, learn from the actions of others in social justice movements. Andrés Gonzalez and Tianna Shaw-Wakeman discussed how the STAND coalition could partner with other movements and organizations. Andrés Gonzalez pointed to the movement to redevelop the river as a struggle that STAND could learn from, stating that, “I think we can…understand from our comrades who are

working around the LA River, and how they're thinking…on the river as a whole, and navigating the tensions between private entities as well as public agencies”(Gonzalez 2023). He saw the LA River project as an example of how an aspect of the environment can be thought of in its entirety not just in parts. Often the oil sites in Los Angeles are thought of individually, based on each one’s circumstances, however Gonzalez is arguing that it could also be beneficial to think of all the land of these sites together and to base campaigns on that framework (Gonzalez 2023). Tianna Shaw-Wakeman also connected the work on ending oil drilling in Los Angeles with other movements, “How it relates to all of the other inc

Garcia also brought up the need for affordable housing and services for the unhoused community including mental health and drug use treatment (Garcia 2023). From a different angle, Maro Kakoussian mentioned community-owned solar projects, food farms, or resiliency hubs as other options for land use (Kakoussian 2023).

However, what was overwhelmingly important for the participants was that these uses would be decided not by them, the government, or a developer, but by the communities that have been impacted by the drill site in their neighborhood. While these uses above were mentioned by the participants as potential options, they were clear that community members should determine the use and that these uses were ones that they had heard community members bring up in past conversations. The participants were in agreement about the driving mission behind the redevelopment which is community-centered land use, however there was a more diverse debate over the way in which this kind of use could be achieved, these options awever asused 22.86 Tm0 gQq0.000009

necessarily rooted in the community. Participant 1 explained this distinction by saying, “there are different mechanisms you can use to make sure that a piece of property isn't just passed around like an asset…but actually just preserved and used by the community and designed and shaped by the community” (Participant 1 2023). Ashley Hernandez also brought up the option of, “If the city of LA is willing to give this piece of land to the Land Trust there's definitely another set of opportunities and alternatives that could happen”, so the city purchasing the land and giving it to a Land Trust organization is another opportunity for governmental partnership (Hernandez 2023).

Mixed Opinions on Private Land Ownership of Sites

Most were cynical of a future where a private developer is able to purchase the land and build housing or another type of building. Ashley Hernandez expressed frustration with developers saying, “You know we've seen time and time again in this community that people come in because they have money, and then they buy stuff, and it's that entitlement, it's that elitism…you have money…but you don't have to be here…because it's our neighborhood” (Hernandez 2023). Andrés Gonzalez went further and suggested that there is currently a burgeoning partnership between real estate companies and oil operators that would negatively impact the redevelopment of the sites if it were to materialize (Gonzalez 2023). Damon Nagami called a market-rate housing developer buying these sites as the “worst case scenario” because it could “ drive up displacement, gentrification in the community and…squandering an opportunity for open space to be affordable housing” (Nagami 2023). The threat of gentrification and displacement was brought up by a few participants as a worry for when the site is redeveloped. These reactions to private development of land are understandable considering that returning the

land back to the community is more in line with environmental justice values than private land ownership which is not inherently accountable to the community nearby.

On the other side, Michele Pritchard was optimistic that even if the cleaned up land was sold to a developer, the city or county of LA could negotiate with the developer to push for certain community uses or a higher number of affordable units if they are building apartments (Pritchard 2023). Participant 1 also believed that there could be requi[( )] TJE-6(e)4(qu6( )] TJE-6(b)20(e)4(p(d

2023). *Rezoning or using Community or General Plans is a way to establish certain priorities and principles in the development of all the former oil sites, not only those with community organizing around the specific sites.* Participant 1 thought that, "promote rezoning of maybe previously industrial or hybrid industrial drill sites through community plan updates…promote, you know, cleaner, healthier uses" (Participant 1 2023). Some of these priorities are mentioned in the Los Angeles County Just Transition Task Force which was also underscored by a few of the participants, such as Michele Pritchard, as a guiding document in this work. Michele Pritchard noted that one of the recommendations of the Task Force was

> for both the city and the county to consider an amendment to the General Plan that would require any former oil drilling site to come into conformance with a certain set of principles around community safety, environmental justice, tribal governance, and so forth" suggesting that this is an idea that has been presented to the city as an option for the implementation of the phase out (Pritchard 2023).

Richard Parks also mentioned that, "some policy on rezoning the land for community use, such as parks, would be a way of recompensing…benefiting a community that has been harmed" (Parks 2023). *Rezoning is a useful option because it will set standards for all sites in the region. However, it is also a more significant commitment for the city to make because it is a long process to amend Community Plans.* Moreover, deciding what the sites will be rezoned as is complicated because different communities are in need of different uses so if all the sites were rezoned for residential, fo

hosting a meeting to inform the community about what will happen at the site. Rather, with this process community members have the power to determine the new use of the site. Many of the organizations interviewed are looking to or have already started community visioning processes on their own with their constituents about what they would like to see happen with the oil sites in their neighborhoods. For some it is still early after the ordinance has passed to begin outreach work because they are still fighting for a shorter phase out period and against lawsuits from the oil industry that are attempting to stop the ordinance.

The Unclear Role of Government in Community Engagement

would be able to provide the resources to host events for community engagement while community-based organizations have the connections within the community to convince people to show up and be involved in a process like this.

highest standard of clean, will occur successfully. This is not the first time in which regulatory agencies have been criticized by the environmental justice movement for its insufficient execution of their responsibilities. Regulatory failures have happened at all levels of government: nationally, at the state level, and locally. *In this case, all three levels of government are involved in some aspect of the cleanup process meaning that not only does each agency have to fulfill their part in the operation, they also have to coordinate with each other to share information and keep the proceedings running smoothly.*

There are concrete steps that government agencies in California could take to better enforce existing regulations. These include:

1. Direct resources towards increased staffing to monitor more sites. One of the concerns is that Los Angeles is going to close many sites in a relatively concentrated period of t

relatively near future, there must be increased accountability measures to secure enough funding from the operator before the site begins the operation of shutting down. In the case of operators that have existing leases in Los Angeles and so have already paid their bonding requirements,

The lack of trust between community-based organizations and government agencies stems in part from the perception from community-based organizations that the government is not protecting them and enforcing regulations geared towards public safety. *One way to build more trust is to demonstrate to the organizations that the state is committed to a safe and thorough cleanup process by building up enforcement mechanisms.* These recommendations above provide a place for the state and city to start in establishing trust.

Involving Community Members in Clean-Up Accountability Measures

Another way to work towards more efficient and thorough cleaning processes, is to create Community Oversight Boards for community members to sit on to monitor the decommissioning and remediation of oil sites in Los Angeles. This was an option discussed by Andrés Gonzalez in his interview, although he cautioned that Community Oversight Boards can become more symbolic if not given sufficient power (Gonzalez 2023). These Boards, if developed properly and granted power, could serve as an accountability measure for the agencies in charge of guaranteeing that the site is cleaned properly because the agencies would regularly deliver updates and reports to the Board. Members of the Boards could include impacted community members, community-based organization members, and other community leaders. Some potential roles for the Boards include holding agencies and the oil operator accountable to certain timelines for decommissioning and remediation, participating in regular meetings with staff

spaces. This is a way to cover all the sites in Los Angeles under the same cleanup guidelines and not have to negotiate for a high cleaning standard at each site. It also would ensure that none of the

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand what community activists who have been involved in the campaign to phase out oil drilling in Los Angeles consider to be their goals in the cleanup and redevelopment process of oil sites which will be closing in the region. When the STAND-LA coalition began its work in 2013, many people said that they had no shot in winning a battle against the oil companies of the region. The coalition members and their allies chose to focus on building the world that they wanted to see, including a full phaseout of oil and gas drilling at both the city and the county. Now, they can also begin to act upon their goals of what they want to see happen with the oil sites. This project illuminated what these goals are and some possible avenues of reaching them. Twelve community leaders and activists were interviewed about their thinking around the cleanup, potential uses, and ownership model of oil sites and how communities living near each of these sites should be engaged in the cleanup and redevelopment process.

While different participants had different strategies, the foundational goals of each of their proposed plans were the same. The main argument of the participants was for the city and county to prioritize thorough cleanup to the highest standard paid for by the oil operator, and the creation of community-centered land uses whose use is decided on by the community through community engagement processes. Some of the most important conclusions that can be drawn

Limitations

For many of the participants, this conversation around the future of the sites could be considered premature because they are still fighting for the ordinance in court and are pushing for a shorter amortization period than twenty years. This study could have taken place more into the future when these two issues have been concluded and the participants and their organizations have had more time to sit down with their community and ask about potential land uses and strategies for redevelopment that they would prefer. Additionally, this research focuses broadly on each of the four topics listed in the research question (cleanup, land ownership, land use, and community engagement). Further research could be done in more depth into each of these topics because they each contain more nuance and depth than could be explored in the scope of this project.

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Nagami, Da w BibliograpLe>BibliograpLe>Biblio

Appendix 1:

Interview Questions:

Do you c

Community Engagement:

- What does your organization want to see in terms of community engagement and participation in the cleanup and redevelopment process? What role does your organization want to play in this process?
- Has the city engaged your organization or your community in planning the drafting of the phaseout policy?
- What kind of engagement would you like to see from the LA city and county government to ensure community involvement in land use decision making?
- What are the barriers that make it difficult to participate in these kinds of decision-making processes?
- Do you think communities can use organizing strategies and tactics to influence local government decision-making? How and what types of strategies?
- What makes community participation difficult? How can local government facilitat

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