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Ed Soph: Is Denton's gas well ordinance ethical?

By Ed Soph Jan 1, 2019

In 2015, the Denton Drilling Awareness Group, leader of the Frack Free Denton campaign, took a gas well safety survey to find out what Denton residents did and did not know about the risks of urban drilling and fracking. The results revealed that many residents were unaware of what to do in the event of a gas well explosion or fire. Many did not even know if there were wells close to their homes or children's schools.

As a result of the survey the city organized a gas well safety symposium (<https://bit.ly/2LKXzz2>) and continues to update the gas well inspection division's website to provide residents with a well locator and well inspection records. (<https://bit.ly/2Ti16Ht>). However, there is no information regarding potential health impacts of well emissions, precautions that should be taken during the fracking process, or what to do if a well explodes 250 feet (the current reverse setback distance from a well) from your house, condo or apartment.



Ed Soph



Denton DAG has asked the city to conduct a new survey to re-evaluate citizens' awareness of gas wells. There are thousands of new residents since the 2015 survey, and new multifamily and single-home developments are subject to that reverse setback of a mere 250 feet from existing wells.

The city is hesitant to conduct a new survey. The only clear explanation provided by city staff is that such a survey might frighten residents.

Is it ethical for the city to enact a gas well ordinance and not make efforts to determine whether or not residents are aware of the dangers posed by wells and what to do in an emergency such as the 2015 well explosion and fire near homes in the West Glen Drive neighborhood off West Windsor Drive? Do you live near a gas well? Does your neighborhood have an evacuation plan? Are you prepared?

The city's current gas well ordinance (2015) endangers some residents more than others. That ordinance mandates a setback of 1,000 feet from existing homes and protected uses (schools, churches, day care facilities, hospitals, apartments) for new gas well sites. However, new homes, apartments and other new protected uses may be built as close as 250 feet to existing wells. Is that equal protection? Do new residents deserve less protection than established ones? Is that ethical?

There is also the issue of not enacting truly protective ordinances because of the influence of special interests. For example, is it ethical to expose new renters and homeowners to the potential dangers of nearby existing gas well sites because there is no ordinance mandating that well operators, developers or Realtors notify those potential residents of the wells' proximity? Is this lack of disclosure of potential health hazards and lowered property values ethical?

An ethics ordinance is not just about an official being caught with his or her hand in the civic cookie jar, or about sealing deals on secret junkets to Las Vegas or Thackerville. There is also whether actual ordinances passed by the city, and the consequences and effects of those ordinances, are ethical.

Denton's ethics ordinance states, "City Officials have a responsibility to the citizens to administer and enforce the City Charter and City Ordinances in an ethical manner."

If the reluctance to conduct a new gas well awareness survey and the inequities of the current gas well ordinance are any measure, our city officials have failed to educate and protect current and future residents. That is not ethical behavior.

ED SOPH is the president of the Denton Drilling Awareness Group and has lived in Denton 31 years.

