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Local officials should have the courage to comment on Phillips 66 rail project

By [TOM FULKS](#)
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Apparently, some local officials don't have the political courage to carry out the job they were elected to do.

Perhaps to them, "courage" means refusing to do their job, like that church lady in Podunk, Ky., elected "the people's" county clerk but refusing to issue marriages licenses to all people, including same sex couples, required by the Supreme Court.

Using instruments of the state to impose religious beliefs on citizens – that takes some crazy courage.

Most elected leaders in the cities of [San Luis Obispo](#), [Pismo Beach](#) and [Grover Beach](#) did their jobs – perhaps courageously – by taking a stand on [Phillips 66's oil-train rail-spur project](#).

They took public input and formed unambiguous public positions, saying: "No" to supertrains running through their towns five times a week loaded with Canadian tar sand crude and highly combustible bitumen thinner; "No" to risking the public's health and safety for no clear public benefit; "No" to incurring emergency response training and equipment costs no one has offered to pay.

By doing so, they acknowledged their single most important job: protecting the health and safety of the people in the communities they serve.

It's in the "Elective Politics 101" course syllabus: "Don't let people die if you can help it."

That shouldn't take extraordinary courage – it's their job, after all. Yet, most other elected local folk [up and down the track](#) remain peculiarly silent, apparently unwilling to do their jobs.

Not only do they refuse to take a position on the project, [currently under review by the county](#), they haven't sufficiently explained their silence. Some even appear to be actively trying to prevent public discussion. Why?

There are 11 elected political bodies along the rail: San Miguel Community Services District, Templeton CSD, Santa Margarita Advisory Council, the city councils of Paso Robles, Atascadero, San Luis Obispo, Pismo Beach, Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande, and the Oceano and Nipomo CSDs.

Other than Pismo, Grover and SLO, none has taken an official position. The Paso Robles council took no position but did offer [a tepid note to the feds](#) urging better rail safety.

During the past year, several oil trains derailed and exploded back east, making for some spectacular news video. You'd think those catastrophes would spur timid local elected officials into asking serious questions about the pending oil-train project.

The disinterest of so many local elected bodies exhibits either a deliberate effort to dodge public scrutiny and accountability, or a willful disregard for the public interest.

Their silence on issues such as local rail safety, emergency preparedness and the risks accrued by those in or near the "blast zone" of an exploding oil train tanker is unconscionable.

This entire project is politically predicated on the willingness of most SLO county residents to risk their health, safety and peace of mind so Phillips 66 alone can profit.

The company's fluffery about new jobs – exactly 12 – oil price uncertainty and other self-serving doublespeak is cover code for why we should willfully accept all the risk while Phillips reaps all the benefit.

While Phillips peddles this fish tale, Pismo Beach City Councilman Erik Howell is hawking a weak excuse to stay on the sidelines of this issue that's crucially important to the residents of his city.

Howell's dodgy defense for disappearing from his City Council's decision to oppose the oil train project is that the project might someday come before the [California Coastal Commission](#), of which he's a politically appointed member.

He's concerned he'd have a conflict of interest as coastal commissioner if he previously expressed an opinion as Pismo city councilman. So he didn't cast a council vote.

Howell appears to have elevated his Coastal Commission position above his City Council job, without which he'd not be a coastal commissioner.

Pismo voters elected Howell to the City Council, not the Coastal Commission. If this state-level position prevents him from doing his City Council job, he should quit the commission. Or at least recuse himself if the project does show up before the commission.

When Katcho Achadjian was a county supervisor, he voted for the Los Osos sewer project. When he was appointed to the Coastal Commission, Achadjian voted for the same project.

It's an easy call to make, and Howell's silence in Pismo is telling.

By choosing to forego his local elected responsibilities in favor of his state political position, Howell demonstrated something, and it wasn't courage.

Like the Lion in Oz, Howell and other timorous local elected folks may find political courage – someday, when it won't matter.

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