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Fort Worth's Air Quality Study Committee appears fragile from the get-go, itself indicative of the state of [non]civil discourse in today's public arena. Its task of determining the impact of gas well drilling on air quality seems concise and measurable enough, certainly information in demand. However, industry's level of participation, and a policy of ignoring what has come to be referred to as "context," could ruin the Committee's credibility.

Placing three industry representatives on this Committee of ten gave rise to howls of protest mixed with allegations that industry's very presence is enough to tarnish the Committee's credibility. Since the Committee's mission demands a good understanding of gas well drilling, such a perspective illustrates the irrational detour this critical community dialogue has taken.

The idea of banning industry from this discussion is pure folly. Any industry engaged in technological pursuits must be intimately involved in such dialogue, otherwise proprietary expertise would be muzzled, at the peril of enlightened discourse. In the medical device industry, to cite but one example, reliance on the expertise of industry is essential to the assimilation of new technology, leading to partnerships between clinicians and purveyors of technology that more effectively address their shared goal of enhanced patient care.

Ironically, not trusting industry is less an affront to them, and more of an insult to the ability of non-industry Committee members to think for themselves, regardless of the hype (that some attribute to industry). The logic of this argument would dictate that impressionable Committee members be identified and dismissed in favor of more stable, independent thinkers who can differentiate nonsense from viable policy. I doubt if any current Committee members should be dismissed.

A look at context is an identification of multiple sources of a particular compound, quantified and ranked for comparative purposes. It is the only way gas well emission numbers will be meaningful. Context is critical, especially on the topic of benzene, because activities related to drilling could be more culpable than the actual drilling process, e.g., diesel trucks that service drill sites.

Ignoring context would inevitably lead to more benzene pollution, not less, as seen in comparing the I-30 excavation in Arlington to a typical drill site. If benzene from diesel trucks at a four to six week drill site is problematic, then the four plus years of the I-30 excavation and 3-Bridges project in Arlington must be depositing a tsunami of benzene into the environment. Yet if memory serves, no one has complained about the environmental impact of THOSE diesel trucks.....perhaps because they are not servicing gas wells? This hypocrisy unveils agendas more political than environmental, in my opinion, and should be a major concern to legitimate environmental stewards. Shunning context is a recipe for environmental decay, while embracing it is certainly not a marketing gimmick deployed by shady drillers.

Perhaps this juncture calls for a little introspection by both sides regarding intent. Are we concerned about air quality, or are we out to castigate the natural gas industry? I trust it's the former, and if so, it is imperative that all sources of benzene be examined for one purpose: context. Until we quantify the sources of benzene, including that of gas well drilling, on a relative basis, we cannot have intelligent deliberation nor foster lasting progress in urban drilling. As a consequence, we could not only cause real economic damage, we risk overlooking more prevalent sources of compounds deleterious to our environment.

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