

The New York Times

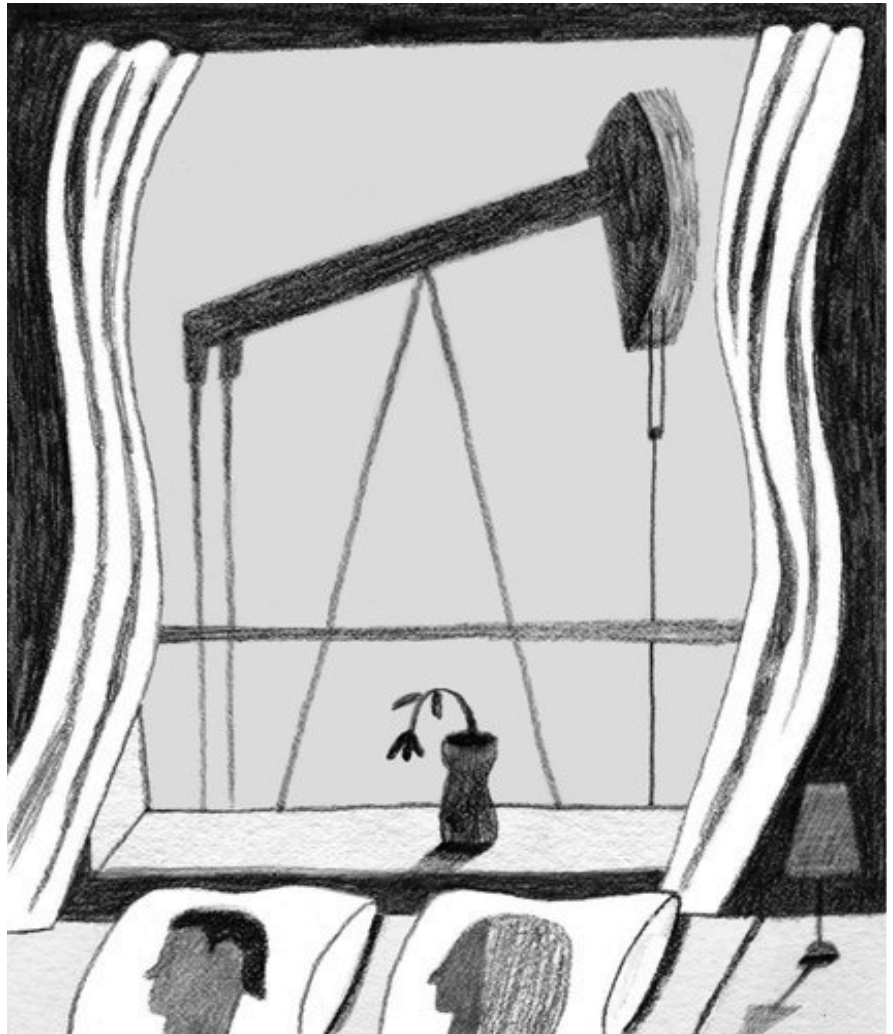
The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

The Danger of Urban Oil Drilling

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD
NOV. 27, 2015

Many Los Angeles residents are familiar with a sight that may seem strange to outsiders: an oil pump operating mere feet from businesses or homes. A recent lawsuit claims that the city has systematically failed to address drilling's environmental consequences, especially in lower-income neighborhoods that are majority black and Latino.

Los Angeles is currently home to over 1,000 oil wells. The 1970 California Environmental Quality Act requires the city to conduct a preliminary review before approving a new drilling project to determine whether a more extensive review of its environmental impact is necessary. The lawsuit, filed by the advocacy groups Youth for Environmental Justice, the South Central Youth Leadership Coalition and the Center for Biological Diversity, alleges that the city routinely exempts projects from that provision.



CreditDaniel Salmieri

The plaintiffs found only one case in which the city actually required a full environmental review for oil drilling.

The suit further alleges that the city grants drilling applications in a discriminatory manner — for instance, by allowing dirtier diesel drilling rigs in the majority-black and Latino neighborhoods of South Los Angeles and Wilm-

ington, while requiring quieter and less polluting electric rigs on the city's wealthier west side. And it says the city has required higher walls around drill sites in majority-white neighborhoods, offering residents there greater protection from dust, sounds and lights.

Pollutants from oil drilling, such as benzene, can cause cancer and other illnesses. Wilmington's cancer rate is among the highest in Southern California. Residents there and in South Los Angeles have also experienced headaches, nosebleeds, asthma and eye irritation, among other health problems. Some have complained of drilling noise that goes on all night. One drilling site is less than 100 feet from a clinic serving people with HIV. Many wells are very close to playgrounds, homes or schools.

Environmental justice advocates have been saying for years that poor people and racial minorities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards around the country. Los Angeles appears to be a dramatic example of this problem.

Michael LoGrande, the city's planning director and a defendant in the suit, said before the suit was filed that the city would seek expert advice and acknowledged that "Angelenos residing in communities throughout the city have been and continue to be affected by oil drilling operations."

City officials declined to comment to The Times on the lawsuit, but their duty seems clear: to review the potential environmental impact of all new drilling projects, as the 1970 law requires, and then to figure out what steps need to be taken to protect people from hazards associated with oil wells.

In addition, the city should arrange for appropriate medical care for those who become sick.

A more thorough examination of drilling applications may force Los Angeles to examine a larger question, too: whether drilling for oil so close to homes and schools is ever truly safe.