

Whittier oil project stopped by judge

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Whittier's controversial oil and gas exploration project under way in the Whittier Hills was ordered stopped by the courts Thursday, which ruled the city is acting against the wishes of county voters who paid for the land to be preserved as open space in perpetuity.

The 38-page tentative ruling by Los Angeles Superior Court Judge James C. Chalfant came down hard on the city and its partners, Matrix Oil Corp. and Clayton Williams Energy, Inc. Chalfant granted a preliminary injunction to the Mountains Recreation Conservation Authority, and also ruled the project cannot go forward without the approval from the Los Angeles County Regional Open Space District. The district, which oversees land purchased from Proposition A, a 1992 ballot measure adopted by 64 percent of county voters, is governed by the five county Board of Supervisors.

Because the city purchased 1,280 acres of spent oil land in part with \$9.3 million from Prop. A monies, distributed by the Santa Monica-based MRCA, the judge said using a portion of those lands for oil drilling violated the public trust.

"When the parties say we want this for open space that is inconsistent with having an oil derrick on it," Chalfant said from the bench. His ruling will most likely be made final on Thursday, June 13. At that time, MRCA must decide if it wants the court to issue a judgment or to sue for damages.

The tentative decision was the most important court ruling in the long-running case. Local opponents, including members of the Whittier Hills Oil Watch (WHOW) hugged each other after the court hearing ended. Local opponents, the county and conservation groups, who've been fighting the project since its inception in 2008 were overjoyed.

"This is a great day This is what we've been telling our City Council; that this project was not done properly," said Lupe Sahagun-Garcia, a member of WHOW who unsuccessfully ran for council, outside the courtroom.

"I'm still in shock. I'm so excited," said Marta Borbon, an organizer with WHOW.

The city of Whittier and Matrix will now have to close down the project. Matrix has already begun drilling test wells on a 7-acre site adjacent to Friendly Hills, at the end of Catalina Avenue that will have to be closed up, according to an attorney for the oil company.

"Clearly this is a big victory for the voters who passed Prop. A," said Scott Kuhn, one of the attorney for the county open space district arguing the case. "The judge clearly affirmed the voter's intent."