A vote last week by the Los Angeles City Council will initiate a process to ban new oil and gas wells and phase out existing wells within the City’s limits. This historic vote is a major victory for environmental justice communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the harmful impacts of neighborhood oil drilling for far too long.

The win follows from more than a decade of advocacy by STAND-L.A., a local environmental justice coalition, to stop neighborhood oil and gas drilling in Los Angeles. The vote comes on the heels of Culver City and L.A. County measures last year to initiate phase-out processes, together putting the region on track to end harmful oil and gas extraction activities.

The L.A. City Council’s motion, which was introduced by Councilmember Paul Krekorian and seconded by Council President Nury Martinez, directs the Department of City Planning to collaborate with the City Attorney’s office to draft an ordinance that:
• Prohibits new oil and gas extraction operations and
• Designates existing operations a nonconforming land use (and requires them to be phased out).

The motion also:
• Instructs the Office of Petroleum and Natural Gas Administration and Safety (OPNGAS) to hire a consultant to conduct an amortization study to determine a reasonable phase-out period;
• Directs OPNGAS to create a new city policy for plugging and remediating inactive wells within 3-5 years of the end of well operations; and
• Requires the City to participate in L.A. County’s Just Transition Taskforce, which will create job opportunities for workers employed by the oil and gas industry.

The Council’s actions will help alleviate health burdens on residents living near drill sites, who experience higher rates of asthma, sinus problems, eye burning, severe headaches, loss of sense of smell, persistent cough, and nose bleeds, among other long-term health impacts. Los Angeles’ low-income communities and communities of color bear the brunt of these impacts, contributing to public health, racial justice, and environmental inequities.

The needs and priorities of these communities have been represented by organizations in the STAND-L.A. coalition, which brings together environmental,

public health, housing, and community-based perspectives. Members include Physicians for Social Responsibility L.A., Communities for a Better Environment, SCOPE, Redeemer Community Partnership, Holman United Methodist Church, Black Women for Wellness, and Esperanza Community Housing. STAND-L.A.’s powerful rallying cry, “No drilling where we’re living”, and tireless organizing and power building were critical in securing this vote.

So, what happens next? Changing the designation for existing wells and prohibiting new wells will require a new ordinance to amend the City’s land use and zoning codes, a process that requires approval by the City Planning Commission, adoption by the City Council, and the Mayor’s signature before the ordinance can take effect. The amortization study will provide support for a reasonable (and legally-defensible) phase-out period for existing wells. The 2021-2022 City budget earmarked approximately $3.5 million for an amortization study of oil sites. Additionally, Culver City and L.A. County’s phase-out processes may generate best practices, and state-level action may also be on the horizon.

Over the last several years, UCLA’s Frank G. Wells Environmental Law Clinic has weighed in to explain the legal basis for local phase-out efforts. We look forward to working together with the community to advance this important goal.