Blending for health and wealth

January 17, 2014 12:00 am

In an almost karmic coincidence, at about the same time citizens waved anti-fracking signs Monday outside the Betteravia Government Center in Santa Maria, Allan Hancock College officials were finalizing a deal with the oil industry to bring workers here for safety training.

The opposition to hydraulic fracturing is primarily based on fears that the process is not done safely, with consequences that could pose environmental risks. If the Hancock College/Petroleum Council agreement works as it should, some of the protesters’ questions could be answered.

The worker training will take place at Hancock College’s Public Safety Training Complex at the Lompoc campus, which is still a few days away from its official opening. The cooperative deal with the oil industry is a major plus for the regional economy.

The terms of the agreement stipulate that the college will offer a series of training programs geared toward getting new workers acquainted with general safety procedures, then running actual training programs for both oil company employees and contractors doing business at oil project sites.

It has been made abundantly clear in recent years that oil workers need safety training. The BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico exposed a litany of safety procedure errors that cost a dozen rig workers their lives, caused significant environmental/ecological damage in the gulf, which subsequently sidetracked or erased countless businesses and jobs on the upper Gulf Coast.

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The new training programs are expected to bring up to 3,000 participants a year to the Lompoc area. No one has yet calculated the economic impacts, but one must assume that adding 3,000 visitors to the flow will be significant. Trainees will come from every oil-producing region of the country.

The anti-fracking demonstration lasted about an hour, and although there are no fracking projects proposed on the Central Coast, the demand for oil, coupled with its availability in this segment of the Monterey shale make fracking a very real possibility here.

At least part of the protest seemed to be aimed at interim fracking rules instituted by the state at the first of this month. Critics insist the rules are inadequate, but a much more comprehensive set of regulations are set to trigger on Jan. 1 of next year.

Hydraulic fracturing involves pumping water and a mixture of chemicals, under high pressure, into rock formations deep underground. The solid rock is fractured, releasing oil and gas, which is then brought to the surface.

Fracking has been in wide use for decades, but critics insist too little is known about the effects the water/chemical mixture may have on groundwater supplies. There is also concern that breaking up deep rock formations has the potential to trigger earthquakes.

The nexus of the fracking debate and the Hancock College agreement to train oil industry workers is important, in that it indicates more highly trained workers will be on the job at the time state and local governments draw up rules for the use of the hydraulic fracturing process.

As we do so often, we applaud Hancock College officials for including the new training program in its public safety complex. The deal is another example of how a community college can truly live up to its name - by providing critically important educational/training services to communities it serves.

Meanwhile, we encourage the continuing discussion of the pros and cons of hydraulic fracturing. The oil industry provides good jobs for the Central Coast, and is a major player in the local economy. At the same time, the work that industry does needs to be safe.