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Group fights for toxic-waste ordinance

By Dave Farrell
Times Tribune staff

SAN JOSE — A group of environmentalists, public health workers, firefighters and labor union representatives has banded together to fight for the passage of a proposed ordinance designed to plug the leaks in Silicon Valley underground chemical storage tanks.

"We're trying to bring as many people as possible together on an apple-pie-and-motherhood kind of issue — fighting toxic wastes," said Ted Smith, a spokesman for the newly formed group.

Smith and several other organizers announced the formation of the group, called the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, at a press conference this morning in

Proposal would tighten controls on chemical storage tanks

The primary goal of the coalition will be to fight for passage of a model toxic wastes ordinance recently developed by the Santa Clara County Fire Chiefs Association. The ordinance is designed to tighten controls on the many underground chemical storage tanks scattered throughout the valley.

A goal of the ordinance is to establish a uniform law throughout the county for the storage and handling of toxic and flammable chemicals used by the electronics industry.

During the past year, nearly 30 companies in the

valley have reported leaks in their underground tanks. So far, only one leak has been linked with contamination of drinking water.

State water quality officials have said, however, that the leaks appear to have caused widespread contamination of water located just below ground level throughout the valley.

The ordinance would require, among other things, that all underground storage tanks be encased in a concrete shell to catch any chemicals that leak. Com-

panies also would be required to continuously monitor their tanks for leaks.

One of the most controversial provisions in the ordinance would require electronics companies to disclose the types and quantities of chemicals they have on their property. Some companies have fought that provision, claiming they would be revealing trade secrets if they released that kind of information.

The coalition will urge city councils throughout the valley to adopt the ordinance without "watering it down" by deleting provisions proposed by the fire chiefs, said coalition member Gayle Southworth.

"We want to make sure the law is as strong as it can be in terms of the substances it covers and the work-

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ers' and the public's right to know what kinds of chemicals are in their neighborhoods," Southworth said.

He said the ordinance would allow companies to develop new products secretly without disclosing the chemicals being used as long as the chemicals are used in small quantities.

Southworth, project manager with the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, said the coalition will fight to keep the petroleum industry included under the ordinance.

In its draft form, the ordinance requires oil and petroleum companies storing gasoline underground to comply with its provisions. Oil industry leaders have complained about the ordinance, however, saying it should be confined to chemicals used primarily by the electronics industry.

Coalition members said they plan to attend a meeting tonight where the draft ordinance will be discussed publicly for the first time.

The ordinance will be discussed by a group of county and city officials at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Council of Santa Clara County. The meeting begins at 7:30 p.m. in the county supervisors chambers, 70 W. Hedding St., San Jose.

To become law, the ordinance will have to be adopted by each city council within the county. That process should begin within a month.