

We Get Press!

Media Coverage of the Power Plant Controversy

The struggle by Carlsbad to take back its coast from NRG has received considerable press coverage in the *North County Times* and the *San Diego Union*. Newspaper columnists also have weighed in on the controversy. Here are some recent stories and columns:

Barbara Henry story, "Carlsbad: Power Plant Opponents Announce Petition Drive Results," April 16, 2009, North County Times:

Opposition to a proposed power plant in Carlsbad appears to be growing, with more than 1,400 people having signed petitions against the project, leaders of a citizens coalition said Thursday. The coalition, called Power of Vision, formed last year to fight the proposed plant. At a Thursday morning press conference in Cannon Park, group members and city officials repeatedly declared their opposition to the project, which would add a 558-megawatt plant on the far eastern edge of the existing 95-acre Encina Power Station property.

"Let's keep up the good fight," coalition coordinator Julie Baker urged the crowd of some 60 people, "because as we've said over and over again this is the wrong plant, in the wrong place, at the wrong time."

That message was repeated in signs that group members carried and the buttons they wore.

Various speakers said the project would be a visual blight, would cause air pollution troubles and would limit the city's coastal redevelopment prospects.

"In all my years of service, I have never seen a project that stands to do as much damage to our community," former Councilwoman Julie Nygaard said.

Not everyone at the park opposed the project. People watching the press conference included David Lloyd, an attorney with Encina property owner NRG Energy Inc.

Asked for his views immediately after the event, Lloyd glanced around Cannon Park and then mentioned dryly that the Power of Vision people sure had a "nice park" to host their press event. The park, which is immediately adjacent to the power plant property, was paid for by Encina, he noted.

"The problem is we do have a (power) plant here and if we're ever going to upgrade it, we've got to start one generator at a time," he added.

NRG Energy Inc. is proposing to put its new power-generating equipment between the railroad tracks and Interstate 5, just south of Agua Hedionda Lagoon and north of Cannon Road. The new equipment, which would include two 139-foot-tall smokestacks, would provide enough power to meet the needs of 400,000 homes.

Company officials say their eventual goal is to demolish the massive power plant building that now sits toward the coastal portion of their site and redevelop that area into shops or housing.

Their plans are being reviewed by the state Energy Commission, which has regulatory authority over the project. A final staff assessment is expected in a month, and commission vote will come later.

Opponents said Thursday that they will submit their huge stack of petitions to the commission so state officials can get a feeling for how much local opposition there is to the plans.

The City Council has unanimously gone on record as opposing the project, and three council members attended Thursday's publicity event. People who live in the Terramar development along the coast also have indicated their opposition to the plans.

Thomas K. Arnold column, "Case Tips Against the NRG Power Plant," February 25, 2009, North County Times

The city of Carlsbad may have found a new ally in its efforts to prevent power giant NRG from building additional power units adjacent to its existing smoke-bellowing eyesore across the coast highway from the beach.

In a Feb. 5 letter to the California Energy Commission, Allan Kosup, Caltrans' point person in the widening of Interstate 5, warns that NRG's proposal to significantly increase its power-plant footprint could clash with Caltrans' plans to widen the freeway.

"It is critical that the proposed Carlsbad Energy Center Project does not preclude, interfere with, or unduly restrict existing or the planned future expansion of I-5 and the double-tracking of the Los Angeles to San Diego Rail Corridor," he writes. The freeway widening would require the removal of the earthen berm, with its towering eucalyptus trees, that currently shields part of the existing plant from the freeway, he adds -- and the location of the proposed new power complex wouldn't leave enough room for a replacement berm.

That's a no-go as far as Caltrans is concerned, according to Kosup, and not just because of "significant adverse cumulative visual impacts."

"It should be noted that concerns raised regarding the potential for errant vehicles impacting the plant are typically addressed through placement of a barrier at the edge of the I-5 traveled way," he adds.

So now it's a safety issue, as well.

My question: How much longer can the California Energy Commission, in good faith, continue to support NRG's plans to build a massive new power plant complex next to its current facility, in the face of mounting evidence that such a project simply doesn't belong there?

We already know the new generation of plants don't require ocean water to cool their generators, so there's no reason in the world NRG needs to build its new power complex on the coast. We only have so much shoreline to go around, and devoting 95 acres to heavy industry is a waste, plain and simple-particularly when it's situated smack-dab in the middle of one of the most scenic stretches of coastline on the entire West Coast.

We also know NRG's new plant can hardly be considered green. With a new president committed to clean, renewable energy sources, is an old-school plant really a smart thing to build? The new power complex will produce an estimated 850,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases a year, the same amount as a city of 60,000 people, according to NRG's own environmental documents. And it should be noted that while NRG fights to build its first new power unit, with a capacity of 540 megawatts, a company in central California is gearing up for a solar-powered facility that will generate even more electricity.

OptiSolar late last year announced the inking of a 550-megawatt solar power agreement with Pacific Gas & Electric for clean, renewable power from its TopazSolar Farm. The project, in San Luis Obispo County, will be the largest photovoltaic solar project in the world.

As for an economic argument, there isn't any. NRG's proposed new power complex has no long-term job creation and could have a very negative impact on North County's tourism industry. And to those who dare accuse the city, and the citizens, of Carlsbad of NIMBYism, consider this: It's a regional issue, not a Carlsbad issue. Further industrial blight along our precious North County coastline affects everyone.

During my recent campaign for a seat on the Carlsbad City Council I spent a lot of time on the sidewalk along Carlsbad Boulevard, asking people if they were Carlsbad voters. More than half said no -- and the vast majority of them were from Oceanside.

Thomas K. Arnold column, "Encina Power Plant a 'Menace'," December 17, 2008, North County Times:

For as long as I have lived in Carlsbad, I have considered the Encina Power Station, with its menacing smokestack just across the street from one of the most beautiful beaches in Southern California, as a nasty pockmark on our otherwise smooth coastal complexion.

That's why I cringe at the prospect of NRG, the power plant's owner, building two new power units on that same 95-acre site, adding to the industrial clutter and making the freeway gateway to Carlsbad look like something out of *Escape from New York*.

But that's precisely what's underway, and the city of Carlsbad is powerless to stop it.

It's up to the California Energy Commission to decide the fate of the project, which initially calls for the construction of a second power plant just north and east of the existing one.

Carlsbad wants NRG to move the plant inland, noting that technology has improved since the existing plant was built and ocean water no longer is needed to cool the generators. But NRG has found fault with each alternate site the city of Carlsbad has proposed and insists on building the new plant next to the old one.

I can't really blame NRG. The power company already owns the land, SDG&E's switchyard is conveniently located nearby, and the permitting process will be a whole lot easier than starting from scratch somewhere else.

And yet each time I pass by the existing plant, my heart sinks. Contrary to propaganda about it being a "replacement facility," the new plant won't put the old one out of service. Rather, the two facilities will operate alongside each other for an indefinite period of time, depending on the state's assessment of energy needs—and in the meantime, NRG wants to build a third power unit.

And while the proposed new plants will have a lower profile, 140 feet still is nothing to sneeze at—particularly when they're standing like sentries within 40 feet of the realigned Interstate 5 freeway.

Hello, Long Beach, here we come.

What can be done? Not much, I'm afraid. The Carlsbad City Council already has voiced its opposition to this project, but the council has no real say in the matter. The decision lies with the California Energy Commission, which is planning a series of public hearings.

Public outcry just might be the only way to fight this beast, just as it stopped the toll road in south Orange County. And from my own weekly walks along Carlsbad's magnificent beachfront sidewalk, I know there are plenty of people who feel as I do about a smoke-spewing industrial complex leering out over our precious coast.

I believe the existing power plant's days are numbered, regardless of whether NRG builds new power units on the site or not. Technology has already rendered it obsolete. So why not let it die a natural death and then reclaim the property for the good of all the citizens of our region who use the beach?

I still remember when my oldest son, Justin, was 6. We were walking along the beach one day and he looked up, pointed, and said, "Daddy, why is there a factory on our beach?"

Hopefully his kids won't have to ask the same question.