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Commissioner Representative Denise Tyrrell

By Nadin Abbott

Photos by Tom Abbott

February 4, 2013 (San Diego)-- In a public hearing Friday, Public Utilities Commission Representative Denise Tyrrell listened to the concerns of over 500 San Diego citizens regarding three proposed peaker gas-fired power plants, including the Cogentrix and San

Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E) plan to develop Quail Brush, near Mission Trails Regional Park. Other proposed plants were Pio Pico in the Otay area and the Wellhead Escondido Energy Center.

Hundreds of citizens wearing bright shirts formed a sea of orange, many rising to speak and urge denial of the Quail Brush application. Blue-shirted members of the Environmental Health Coalition turned out in opposition to all three projects. Residents and other groups from across the county also came to oppose the projects, which collectively drew just a single voice in support.

Pete Hasapopoulos of the Sierra Club asked why San Diego Gas and Electric and Cogentrix, the Applicant, were not present? Former Assemblywoman Lori Saldana suggested that perhaps pressures behind the scenes could explain the absence of SDG&E and Cogentrix. "This is like a game of polo. This is what we see above the water," she told the CPUC representative, suggesting that what under the water line, the pushing and shoving, is outside of the public's view.

Hasapopoulos later pointed to Commissioner Representative Tyrell that the Quail Brush project is hardly a NIMBY (*not in my backyard) issue, since the Commission has received over 8,000 e-mails statewide. He also pointed out that this "is not a regular meeting."



Pate Hasapopoulos

This plant has broad opposition countywide, not just from those living near the proposed site. That said, there were many Santee residents among the opposition present. Among them was Santee Councilmember Jack Dale. Before the meeting he told ECM, "I hope they listen to us, the region, science and progress. The plant is to make Congentrix money, and it will put property values at risk."

Joseph Polizzi, who lives within a mile of the proposed site echoed, Councilmember Dale. "We do not want to have this plant near our home. My family and my wife have medical issues, respiratory issues," he said, adding, "Property values are already taking a hit. I don't want to see them go down any further."

Monserrat Hernandez from Logan Heights, a member of the Environmental Health Coalition, told ECM, "We came in opposition to more electrical stations in San Diego, since they are dirty energy in our community. What we need is sustainable green energy. There are alternatives. Rooftop solar is the best."



Dave Roberts Addressing the crowd

Newly sworn in County Supervisor Dave Roberts told ECM that there are initiatives for green energy already at the County level. He has been working with Supervisor Dianne Jacobs on these plans. They are "figuring the details right now."

ECM asked him about the wind farms in the backcountry, and he said that we need to figure out different options, but that "We need solar, it is our best option."

Roberts confirmed to Tyrrell that the opposition to the three plants before the CPUC is bipartisan and countywide. He reminded her that the City of San Diego Planning Commission, the City Council, the Santee City Council and the Board of Supervisors have expressed opposition to this plan. The County is well on its way to meeting targets for green house gases using rooftop solar. These plants would be a diversion from these goals, and ratepayers will pay for them for decades to come, he emphasized.

He added that the future is in a smart grid, and distributive energy networks. These networks essentially do not have a centralized point of energy production, and each of your rooftop solar installations is a mini power plant that feeds extra energy to the grid, and takes energy when it needs it.

He noted that just this week the County approved a plan in Ramona for a 400 acre development that will have 125 homes; all of them will be wired for both rooftop solar and electric vehicle charge stations. This is the first project of its kind in the East County.

Saldana told Tyrell that "California's goal is to have renewable plants in California." She added, these "are the jobs of the future, not in building dirty power plants." She echoed others testimony on the job creation. While these plants are expected to produce 35 permanent jobs, rooftop solar can produce thousands of jobs, and we have just hit two percent of installed capacity countywide.



Former Assemblywoman Lori Saldana

Lane Sharman with the San Diego Energy District raised an important technical aspect. Since the utility is getting subsidized in the form of a power purchase agreement, we, as rate payers, will pay for this power plant for the next 20 years. It matters little if it is online or not. In fact, we are paying for the power produced at the San Onofre power plant, even though the reactors are off line and have not produced power in the past year.



Nate Sherman

Because of these agreements, Sherman told the Commissioner Representative that San Diegans "are already burdened with too high a cost of transmission." He added, that the San Diego electrical market is not competitive because of these agreements.

Michael Sullivan provided emotional testimony that "as public citizens we do not have the benefit of the private meetings. From the beginning SDG&E did not respect

the law." He added, "Instead of withdrawing the application (when the San Diego City Council requested withdrawal), they went on to the State." They want to change an open space area designation to an industrial designation. SDG&E sought this "for a project that SDG&E has stated might be on 40% of the time for peaking power."

The fact is that the California's energy consumption has gone down to pre-2004 levels, due to saving measures and more efficient buildings. He reminded the Commission Representative that we are doing alright even with San Onofre down.

In the end he broke down, since his mother lived near a power plant, and died from a heart attack. He wondered aloud if she would still be alive if she did not live near all those pollutants.

He reminded the CPUC representative that Climate Change "is the most important issue they need to deal with this year." He added that this is a global phenomena. "We cannot keep on doing what we have been doing."

The only person in the audience who testified in favor of the plant was Victor Esparza, a construction worker from Jamul. He said, that "we need these peaker plants so we can get power in between wind and solar." He said that during the power outage people were complaining at how slowly power was restored and that if we choose to "stop these ideas, and we really need to think about it." He ended his testimony by speaking to the audience and telling them, "We have to be careful what projects are stopped and that we cannot just say no to everything."

This meeting was held by the Representative, and not an actual Commissioner, since under the Brown Act she can talk to all five Commissioners. If an actual commissioner came down, he or she would only be able to speak to one or at most two, of their counterparts. Tyrell said that a final decision is expected at the next CPUC meeting later this month, which is why they held this public forum; she said that there was no time for a formal hearing in San Diego. This was after she was challenged a few times as to why we have had repeated delays in the final vote.

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