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Chula Vista says goodbye to a '50s-era power plant

After 14 years of wrangling, the South Bay Power Plant is imploded into history. The city has dreams of a park and resort hotel in its place on the waterfront.

By Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times

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CHULA VISTA, Calif. — A flock of birds flew away, as if the avians knew something big was coming. Misty geysers of water were sprayed into the air, to keep down the dust.

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And then a series of explosions broke the Saturday morning calm and, within seconds, the South Bay Power Plant, an admired and yet also hated fixture on the Chula Vista waterfront since the late 1950s, crumbled into history.

Two hundred pounds of charges detonated 300 pounds of dynamite, and the 165-foot structure of concrete and metal folded inward on itself.

Cheers arose from the crowd estimated at more than 7,000 people, many of whom had waited for hours, cameras at the ready.

FOR THE RECORD:

South Bay Power Plant: An article in the Feb. 3 California section about the implosion of a power plant in Chula Vista, Calif., said the subsequent cleanup would include removal of 21 tons of salvage metal. It is 21,000 tons of salvage metal. —

"It's crazy, but I grew up here and it's always been part of our life," said Susan Bonner, 60, dabbing tears from her eyes. "I'm going to miss its great big, ugly, hulking presence."

Wes Jordan, 25, who works for a sandblasting company, was here because, as he explained, "implosions are just cool to watch, and besides, I never got to watch them bring down the Sands in Las Vegas."



A gaggle of elected officials watched from a VIP section — their dreams of turning the property into a park and resort hotel now one step closer. The Port of San Diego and the city of Chula Vista have big plans for the area; the port bought the plant for \$115 million in 1999.

The explosions, which went off on schedule at precisely 7 a.m., were brief, but the politicking and permitting process had been lengthy.

"In reality, it's taken us 14 years to get this massive structure to 'instantly' disappear," said Shirley Horton, former Chula Vista mayor and a former assemblywoman.

The current mayor, Cheryl Cox, declared herself "happy, very, very happy." The event, she said, "marks the end of an era for a structure that has, famously and infamously, stood on our waterfront for half a century."

The site, she said, will become home to "the world-class destination we deserve."

When it was built by San Diego Gas & Electric Co., the plant provided badly needed electricity to allow the region to expand and broaden its economy. Construction began in 1958 and the first of four units, powered by fuel oil, went online in 1960.

If the politicians had bittersweet memories of the plant that, at full capacity, could generate 700 megawatts of electricity, the attitude of environmentalists was "good riddance." The plant has been shut down since 2010 but during its active life was branded a major polluter.

Laura Hunter, an official with the Environmental Health Coalition, said the plant was "the poster child for our fossil-fuel past," from an era when it was politically acceptable to spew pollutants into the water and air, particularly if the downstream or downwind communities "are populated by people of color."

More work, above and below ground, needs to be done before the site is clean under a \$43-million cleanup project, including the removal of 21 tons of salvage metal and 3,400 tons of other non-hazardous waste.

Two companies with extensive experience in demolition and dismantlement — Oakland-based Silverado Contractors and Tulsa, Okla.-based Dykon Explosive Demolition Corp. — are in charge.

Bill Wright, 57, a mechanical engineer employed by the Navy "to repair ships," watched the process with scientific detachment, neither sentimental nor joyous.

"It's something to do on a Saturday morning," he said. "We don't get things like this in Chula Vista very often — actually, we've never had anything like this."

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