University City residents are gathering in opposition Monday evening to a major power plant proposed for a site a short distance away from thousands of homes and businesses.

To their relief, politically speaking?

It's just been taken off the "fast track."

After NBC 7 San Diego first aired details of the project last Friday, Edmonton, Canada-based Capital Power Corp. -- the energy company behind it -- on Monday pulled the plug on a timeline that would have put it on the city's November 6 ballot.

Executives of its American subsidiary, U.S. West, told the mayor's office that they would begin...
“extensive consultation” with the community before launching the political and regulatory processes.

Even so, warned City Councilwoman Sherri Lightner: “I’m not on board with this or putting the proposition on the ballot that would allow the lease of the land. It is open space land. It’s Pueblo land (requiring voter approval for sales and long-term leases). And it should stay open space as part of the University City Community Plan area.”

The proposed power has been targeted for 50 acres south of the North City Water Reclamation Plant, and would use 7 million gallons a day of recycled effluent for cooling its natural gas-fired electricity generating process.

University City residents only learned of the venture, and talks involving officials in the mayor’s office, in the past two weeks.

“Neither the public nor the City Council was informed of the project,” said Debby Knight, president of Friends of Rose Canyon, in an interview Friday. “It’s been sprung on everybody, and now they want to rush it onto the ballot.”

Community activists in University City aren’t the only folks pushing back against it.

“We’ve got the whole city now calling us, emailing us and talking to us about health concerns,” says Janay Kruger, who chairs the board of directors of the University Community Planning Group, which is hosting a community forum Monday evening in Westfield University Town Center’s forum hall.

“They believe the financial deal smells — that it’s not good enough for the city,” Kruger added, referring to the city’s potential $3 million annual cut from the project over two to four decades.

The most recent local power plant was built on east Otay Mesa, miles from heavily populated areas.

Capital Power’s would be a quarter-mile away from the closest residential and commercial dwellings in University City, and well within a mile of the Westfield UTC mall.

Says 1st District City Council candidate Ray Ellis, Lightner’s November runoff election opponent: “We’ve got to look out for that community. And that’s just not the appropriate location, scale or anything else (for a power plant).”

There are also questions about whether its proposed output of 830 megawatts is really needed, given that level of electricity now being imported via SDG&E’s recently energized Sunrise PowerLink transmission system.

“The company has admitted that the majority of this power will likely be exported — it won’t even be used in San Diego,” says Nicole Capretz, a leading activist with San Diego’s Environmental Health Coalition. “So here we’re getting all the pollution and paying all the cost, and yet we’re not necessarily receiving the benefits.”

Peter Sawicki, the locally based business development manager for Capital Power’s U.S. West firm, told NBC 7 in an interview Friday that the plant would be the “cleanest and most efficient” plant of its kind — and that if there is no need for the energy, it would not be built.

“California has one of the strictest codes and standards in the world,” Sawicki said. “This plant will not be permitted if it poses health and safety risks to anyone in the surrounding community.”

The Capital Power-U.S. West proposal came about in response to a bidding process initiated by the mayor’s office.

On Friday and Monday, NBC 7 sought comment from officials involved in more than a year of negotiations.

So far, no spokesman has been provided.
To promote the venture in the court of public opinion, the energy company has hired prominent San Diego political consulting and public relations firms.

As for the now-abandoned fast-track timeline set out by the mayor’s office -- starting with a Wednesday hearing before the City Council’s Rules Committee -- Sawicki explained that because talks were confidential pending preliminary understandings, details only recently could be released.

Follow NBCSanDiego for the latest news, weather, and events: iPad App | iPhone App | Android App | Facebook | Twitter | Google+ | Instagram | RSS | Text Alerts | Email Alerts

Leave Comments