

Yoloans energized in protest of power lines

By Jonathan Edwards | Enterprise staff writer | July 01, 2009 08:09

WOODLAND - They called it 'dumb,' they called it 'stupid' and they vowed to find the biggest rake and beat a proposed power line project out of Yolo County.

Yolo supervisors scolded visiting officials from the Transmission Agency of Northern California at their Tuesday meeting and bashed TANC's multibillion-dollar project, which would run high-voltage power lines through Yolo County.

The agency has proposed three alternate north-south routes to transmit energy tapped from wind, solar or other renewable sources in Lassen County to power users in the Bay Area, Central Valley and Sierra foothills. All three possible lines cut through Yolo County, bottlenecking in the Clarksburg area before crossing the Sacramento River and heading south.

Clarksburg is Supervisor Mike McGowan's turf, and he said TANC didn't give him a heads-up.

'I find that personally offensive,' he told the agency's general manager, Jim Beck. 'That's my district, those are the people I try to work with to make sure they don't get screwed. ... Any organization that would be that stupid, that arrogant, is DOA as far as I'm concerned.'

TANC is made up of a hodgepodge of public entities, none of which is in Yolo County.

With eminent domain powers, the agency can seize property for projects benefiting the public. The lines would relieve the state's clogged energy grid, providing stability and preventing blackouts, said Patrick Mealoy, a private consultant hired by TANC.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis said he hasn't seen the proof. Backing a chorus of residents denouncing the project, Provenza pressured Beck to give elected officials and citizens 'full access' to any documents justifying the project.

With or without justification, TANC's board of directors gets the final word on if and where the power lines go. People in faraway cities have more power than Yolo County residents in deciding what happens in Yolo County, said Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland.

'That really sticks in my craw,' he said.

McGowan called the unchecked power 'fundamentally wrong,' and bad government policy.

Yolo County is circling the wagons to try and get a say. The board voted unanimously Tuesday to support legislation introduced Tuesday by state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis.

Wolk's Senate Bill 460 would regulate publicly owned electric utilities, which, according to a news release, would give local government a louder voice in a more collaborative process.

Yolo County's lawyers are drafting an ordinance allowing the board to nix any routes it doesn't like. TANC's board of directors could override that decision, however, but the county could answer with a lawsuit, throwing the whole mess into court.

The county's Planning Commission takes up the ordinance at 9:30 a.m. Thursday, July 9, at the County Administration Building, 625 Court St. in Woodland.

Why not build the lines in Sacramento, McGowan asked, after pointing out that one route circumvents Sacramento, shooting south through Sutter and Yolo counties.

Energy users in Sacramento stand to benefit from the cheaper, greener power as customers of the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, one of the five participating TANC members driving the project. Yolo County would receive no benefit from the project but is being asked to bear a huge burden, board members and residents said.

'This project is lose-lose for everyone in Yolo County and win-win for everyone in Sacramento,' said Davis resident Nora Shimoda, whose house is under one of the proposed lines. 'We get none of the electricity and all of the burden.'

Beck and Mealoy stood by the project. California needs more power, Mealoy told the board. Over the past 16 years, the state added no major transmission lines while California grew by 5 million people, he said.

And state law requires utilities to generate 20 percent of their energy from renewable sources by the end of 2010. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to up the ante to 33 percent by 2020, and the Legislature is working on doing just that.

To reach the 20 percent benchmark next year, California needs four new major transmission lines and \$4 billion, according to a report released earlier this month by the California Public Utilities Commission. Hitting 33 percent in just over a decade will cost \$12 billion and require almost three times as much renewable electricity.

'There is a need to find new, cleaner sources of electricity,' Mealoy said.

But TANC has not proved the project is the best way to meet those goals, Provenza said. Lassen County's potential for renewable energy is low, according to a report released in January by the state-led Renewable Energy Transmission Initiative. Tapping Lassen would come with high costs and big impacts to the environment, the report states.

Lassen County isn't the ideal location, Mealoy admitted, but roughly 90 percent of renewable energy potential is south of the Bay Area. With utilities across the state scrambling to meet state mandates, competition for Southern California renewables will

be fierce. Lassen, Mealoy said, 'is the most viable opportunity in Northern California.'

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