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East Contra Costa cities welcome power plants in their backyard

By Paul Bugarino and Hannah Dreier
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While much of the Bay Area has fiercely opposed new power plants proposed in their backyards, communities in eastern Contra Costa have welcomed them with open arms.

Over the past 15 years, regulators have approved three power plants that are now operating in the area. Three more planned for East County are working their way through the regulatory pipeline.

Local leaders say the newer natural gas-fired plants will run cleaner and more efficiently than older plants, generating permanent jobs and much-needed property tax revenue.

Power plants, which emit a variety of toxic chemicals linked to health risks, don't have that kind of support anywhere else in the Bay Area.

San Francisco's last fossil fuel plant was shuttered last year. An underwater cable from Pittsburg will help power the city.

In Alameda County, only one new plant has gotten the go-ahead in the past 15 years, and that came after a decade-long fight. In the same period, opponents there successfully fought off three proposed plants.

Power plants have begun clustering in East Contra Costa because they are less likely to run up against legal challenges from residents, according to environmentalists, consultants and professors.

"The communities in San Francisco and Alameda County have been increasingly successful at stopping new power plants and shutting down existing plants," said Shana Lazerow of Communities for a Better Environment. "That area (East Contra Costa)

just doesn't have the political voice yet."

While cleaner than older models, the new plants still bring health risks. Long-term exposure to the compounds these plants emit can cause lung problems and even heart disease, according to California Energy Commission reports.

Environmentalists believe that the proliferation of power plants in East County will lead to health problems.

A report from the Pacific Environment group on the East County plants concluded, "Contra Costa County is already known for its high levels of toxic emissions, and adding more polluting industries will only increase current public health risks."

"Good jobs do not have to come at the price of your family's health," the report said.

But for many in East County, the pollution these might emit is less important than the monetary benefits they will bring. Fifth-generation Oakley resident Karen Gallegos was among the many locals who turned out to a daylong California Energy Commission meeting last week to voice support for a plant proposed in Oakley.

"I'm worried about the health risks, but I know that the need is so much more important right now," she said.

Gallegos said she is confident that the power plants are adequately regulated.

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After examining the pros and cons, Oakley Councilwoman Pat Anderson said she's comfortable having a 624-megawatt plant at the west end of her town. She noted that environmental reports found that the plant does not present a health risk.

Support from Oakley leaders proved crucial to the state's Public Utilities Commission, which approved the plant that would be built for PG&E by Danville-based Radback Energy just months after rejecting it on grounds that it wasn't needed.

Explaining his change of heart at a December meeting, commission President Michael Peevey emphasized how rare it is to find enthusiasm for heavy industry.

"I have to say, it's very pleasant to see a community be in support of plants," he said. "We don't have that over in Hayward."

He told the six city, county and state officials who had come to speak in support of the plant: "You can go home happy. The Public Utilities Commission doesn't often give out Christmas presents."

Ratepayer and environmental groups are appealing the decision.

Political will

Power plants have a long history in this region. PG&E built two plants, distinguished by their large smokestacks, just outside Pittsburg and Antioch in the early 1950s.

In many ways, the area is ideally suited for power plant development. Overhead power lines converge here, and two major PG&E interstate gas-transmission lines, one of which runs from Canada to Southern California, connect just west of the Antioch Bridge.

"The location is perfect," said Ron Gawer, manager of the recently constructed Gateway Generating Station near Antioch. "It's like a big switchyard at the northern end of the Bay Area."

Plants in East Contra Costa generate about 7.5 percent of the state's total.

While the state has recently begun emphasizing renewable energy resources, the boom in power plants is in part a response to the energy crisis of

the early 2000s, according to UC Berkeley professor of public policy Lee Friedman.

"The state's reaction was it should never again let the supply of electricity be so constricted that future shortages could again arise," he said.

Two of the six plants built or proposed in East Contra Costa since 1996 are replacing existing plants, and the other four are new. More than 13 percent of the capacity approved or completed statewide in the past 15 years is slated for East County. By contrast, about 2 percent has been approved for both San Joaquin and Alameda counties.

With new power comes a huge payday for local municipalities.

Oakley and Antioch leaders estimate that the plants will create more than 1,000 construction jobs, scores of permanent positions and millions of dollars each year in property taxes. Oakley alone could receive \$2.7 million annually in tax revenue.

Antioch is looking at GenOn Energy's Marsh Landing, and the annexation of the land where it's being built, to spur commercial development that uses environmentally friendly energy sources and possibly a deep-water port, Councilman Gary Agopian said.

The companies building the plants also have offered lucrative agreements to city leaders.

Radback Energy has pledged \$3 million to Oakley if



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its power plant comes to fruition. In return, the city has relinquished its right to formally oppose the plant.

Oakley, which only became a city in 1999, intends to put the millions toward infrastructure projects and grants for local nonprofit groups.

Antioch, which is in a long-term budget crisis, also stands to receive nearly \$3 million in similar agreements from GenOn.

Environmentalists view these kinds of contracts as a kind of payoff for needy communities.

"It's not a very expensive way for the developers to go about getting their plant approved," Lazerow of Communities for a Better Environment said. "They want communities on their side. If the city officials and chamber of commerce show up and say yes, we want this plant, that makes their lives easier."

Anderson, the Oakley councilwoman, says she didn't take the decision to support the power plant lightly. Through site tours and research into emissions, she concluded that the power plant would be a good fit for an empty lot once used by DuPont.

"We had a blighted piece of land that hasn't been used in over 20 years," Anderson said. "Plus, there's a water line and a gas line sitting there waiting to be used."

Agopian acknowledges there is some concern about pollution but said, "From what I can tell, these plants are using clean natural gas technology and eliminating older, dirtier methods. We aren't selling our souls here."

California imposes relatively stringent air quality standards, and regulators have continually tightened restrictions on power plants.

For example, the old plants used a now-banned process in which cold water is drawn directly from the San Joaquin River for combustion and the warm water is dumped back in after use.

Today, many plants use large drafts of cold air to cool the turbines. Pittsburg's Los Medanos and Delta power plants use recycled water to cool the turbines, which is then pumped to a local wastewater treatment plant.

And because they are more efficient, the new plants emit fewer pollutants. For example, they release 80 percent less nitrogen oxide -- the primary pollutant created in the combustion of natural gas -- than the older plants, according to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Opposition elsewhere

The "not in my backyard" attitude of other Bay Area cities has proved just how hard communities can make things for power companies.

When Tierra Energy wanted to build a facility about a mile and a half south of the Hayward Executive Airport, a coalition of pilots, environmentalists and Hayward and Alameda County leaders rallied and quashed it in 2008.

Closely linked to that project is the Russell City power plant in Hayward, which has drawn heavy opposition from residents and local institutions over the past nine years.

Some locals fear that Russell City will set a precedent for heavy industry at the shoreline and reverse the community's work to reduce crime and increase property values.

"If you live in a congested, dense, wealthy community, you'd rather not have power plants," said an energy consultant who insisted on anonymity because he didn't want to hurt his business, "and you'd be able to collectively impose significant mitigation costs. What traditionally happens, the rich are environmentalists and the



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poor can't afford it."

Russell City's federal air permit withstood a legal challenge in November. Work started on that plant late last year.

Residents' concerns can carry more sway with regulators than officials or organizations, experts say.

In 2009, the state energy commission essentially pulled the plug on the Tesla Power Project proposed in eastern Alameda County, ending an eight-year tussle. One of the key players in stopping the site was Tracy resident Bob Sarvey, whose wife and children have asthma.

Sarvey also testified against Antioch's Marsh Landing project, but he admits that East Contra Costa residents don't tend to share his environmental concerns.

"I'm concerned about the fact that you have three or four power plants all spewing in the same spot," he said. "I'm concerned for the people, but if they think the money's more important, I don't fault them for it."

A 200-megawatt plant planned in Alameda County just south of the East Contra Costa town of Byron is going through the approval process.

Environmental concerns

Industry experts say that while power plants are cleaner than they used to be, they are still not completely benign neighbors.

State reviews show that the new plants will add to an overall pollution level in East County that already exceeds state and federal air quality standards. This area suffers from higher levels of air pollution than surrounding communities in part, environmentalists say, because its inland geography does not allow for effective dispersal.

Fans of the Lange's Metalmark butterfly worry that the nitrogen the plants emit might harm the nearly extinct species by altering soil quality. The orange and black butterfly exists nowhere in the world but a 50-acre sand strip along the San Joaquin riverbank.

As for the health of residents, environmental reviews

have concluded that, individually, the new plants do not pose much of a risk. The Oakley plant, for example, would have an incremental cancer risk of 3.5 in a million, according to the state energy commission.

But environmentalists say that these official health assessments are inadequate because they only address the toxic chemicals emitted by the plant, such as arsenic and lead, but ignore more common "criteria pollutants," such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, that are regulated by the state.

Gas-fired power plants are responsible for 67 percent of the nation's sulfur dioxide emissions and 23 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Both of these compounds have been linked to respiratory illnesses and other health risks.

Opponents of the new plants also note that Oakley and Antioch already have among the highest cancer and heart disease rates in the county, and say that even marginal health risks could snowball into a significant community health problem here.

This possibility seems remote to Contra Costa Supervisor Federal Glover, who represents Antioch and Oakley. He subscribes to the dominant East County viewpoint that the new plants will spark a chain reaction that will lead to better jobs and infrastructure.

"It's been a well-vetted process in each community," Glover said, adding that most environmental complaints have originated from outside the area.



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After weighing all the factors, Glover said, residents have not cried foul because the benefits trump any possible environmental effects.

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Harmful emissions

Natural gas-fired power plants release as least six compounds considered harmful by the Environmental Protection Agency

Emission Health effects

Nitrogen oxide Increased susceptibility to respiratory illnesses, worsened emphysema and bronchitis

Carbon monoxide Reduction in the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood, difficulty with exercise and exertion

Particulate matter Chronic bronchitis, decreased lung function, irregular heart beat, nonfatal heart attacks

Volatile organic compounds Nervous system damage, cancer

Sulfur dioxide Increased asthma symptoms, aggravation of heart disease

Ozone Airway irritation, aggravation of asthma, permanent lung damage

OLD AND NEW POWER

Nitrogen oxide, which contributes to ozone formation, is a primary pollutant from gas-fired plants. Here is a comparison of emissions at East Contra Costa's two older gas-fired power plants, the three new generating stations and the expected levels for the three future plants.

Plant Year Emissions

built (tons per year)

Pittsburg 2000 2,406.4

Contra Costa 2000 979.9

Delta 2009 135.5

Los Medanos 2009 94

Gateway 2009 77.7

Planned Emissions

Marsh Landing 78.7

Oakley 98.8

Willow Pass 77.4

Source: Bay Area Air Quality Management District



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