

MARCH 16, 2016 9:00 AM

Public Utilities Commission must take a stand for environmental justice

Southern California Edison wants to put a natural gas power plant in Oxnard

It's a poor, heavily Latino city that shouldn't be burdened with a plant

PUC Proposal also doesn't account for climate change or sea-level rise

BY CARMEN RAMIREZ

Special to The Bee

The California Public Utilities Commission will soon have an opportunity to shed light on its commitment to addressing climate change and environmental justice – or lack thereof. Unfortunately, the commission appears poised to cave to corporate interests instead of standing up for vulnerable, low-income communities.

Put before the PUC on Thursday is whether to approve a [new natural-gas power plant in Oxnard](#) in coastal Ventura County. There are many problems with the proposed Puente facility, as well as with the process that selected it to address the region's projected energy needs.

The city of Oxnard is a disadvantaged community, and nearly 75 percent of its residents are of Latino origin. According to California Environmental Protection Agency, [Oxnard ranks in the top 20 percent](#) of environmentally burdened cities in the state. Placing a new, polluting facility along Oxnard's coast would reinforce practices that allow wealthier communities to benefit from burdens placed on disadvantaged areas.

As shown by the recent [Aliso Canyon gas leak](#) in Los Angeles, utility and public officials express concern and respond with vigor when wealthy areas are afflicted by pollution. That's typically not the case when low-income areas face similar challenges.

Southern California Edison, which provides electricity to Ventura County, has admitted that it did not consider environmental justice when soliciting bids for the new plant. This decision is not only unconscionable, it defies state policy. For this failure alone, the PUC should reject the proposed Oxnard facility.



State policy also requires utilities to account for the projected impacts of climate change – including sea-level rise – when locating new facilities. The PUC's primary responsibility is ensuring reliable power supplies; ignoring the threat of climate change shirks that responsibility. Experts engaged by the city of Oxnard found that the Puente plant would be vulnerable to coastal erosion, tsunamis and sea-level rise.

While Edison champions the Puente plant as the most affordable short-term option for regional energy generation, it fails to account for a future of higher sea levels and extreme weather. Keeping a power plant functioning in the coastal zone is likely to become more challenging and more expensive as climate change takes hold.

There is also a more fundamental problem with the proposed plant. California is required to generate half of its electrical power through renewable sources by 2030. The Puente plant, which would provide 90 percent of projected regional power needs, would run on fossil fuels and would not come online until 2021.

Thankfully, the Puente facility is not a done deal. Although the PUC is scheduled to vote on the proposal Thursday, it could easily delay action. Better yet, it could direct Edison to reopen its selection process for a new power plant in Ventura County.

The utility could then fix its mistakes by considering additional factors such as environmental justice, resilience to climate change and renewable energy generation.

The governor and Legislature are doing their parts to combat climate change and make our state a greener – and fairer – place. So should the Public Utilities Commission.

Carmen Ramirez is mayor pro tem of the city of Oxnard. She can be contacted at carmen4oxnard@gmail.com.

<http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/op-ed/soapbox/article66493177.html#storylink=cpy>