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Another power plant in Oxnard? Energy Commission must say no: Tom Steyer and Gladys Limon



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California is home to some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. But in our state, not all beaches are created equal. That becomes painfully clear if you drive 50 miles north of Los Angeles to Oxnard, where the beaches have been seized by corporate polluters, marred by industrial waste and devastated by three fossil-fuel power plants that sit along the shoreline.

Oxnard has more coastal power plants than any other city in the state, and not coincidentally, its population is predominantly Latino and low-income. Oxnard became an environmental sacrifice zone when power plants were first constructed over 60 years ago and, for decades, corporations have targeted Oxnard as a dumping site. They have profited from the city's environmental destruction and left behind hazardous waste that continues to threaten the health and safety of its residents.

Now, the fossil fuel giant NRG Energy plans to build a fourth plant to provide extra electricity for the region — the Puente Power Project — on Oxnard's beachfront.

While Oxnard's City Council, state and federal representatives, and residents oppose this project, Puente's fate will be decided by two state agencies — the Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and the Energy Commission (CEC). Last month, over the objections of NRG Energy, CEC ordered a study of alternative energy sources to the Puente power plant. The study found that alternatives such as solar power and energy storage are available; the fossil fuel plant is not the only option.

The study proved what we have long known — the Puente plant is an obsolete solution to our 21st century problems. At a time when California is planning to transition to 100 percent clean energy by 2045, the Puente power plant is an unnecessary project that would shackle Oxnard to the dying fossil fuels industry, while the rest of California develops the technology to meet local energy demands in cheaper, cleaner ways.

Puente is not only an impractical project but also an expensive one. It will drive up electricity prices for Oxnard's poor residents and subject them to volatile swings in the price of natural gas. And it is possible that once plant construction is completed in 2020, it may never even be turned on.

Meanwhile, clean energy alternatives not only have become cheaper but will continue to become more accessible. The cost of clean energy generation and storage has dropped dramatically over the past few years, and that trend is projected to continue strongly. While California is making smart investments to protect our environment and transition to 100 percent clean energy, the Puente Power Project would unnecessarily pollute our air and devote resources to an outdated and costly technology.

This plant would also do nothing to bolster the local or regional economy. Power plants in Oxnard, where per capita income is roughly \$20,000 a year, have prevented the city from taking advantage of California's coastal tourism and recreation industries, which could bring in millions of dollars a year to the local economy. A clean energy alternative to Puente could create more than 715 jobs in the Oxnard area for a fraction of the cost and would build a stronger, more inclusive and more sustainable economy in Ventura County.

From an investment perspective, building another dirty fossil fuel plant in Oxnard is just plain dumb.

Not to mention the costs on the health and well-being of Oxnard residents. According to the CalEPA, the city ranks in the top 10 percent of communities in the state that are most burdened by pollution. It is no surprise then that Oxnard has higher asthma rates than 90 percent of California, even though it is a coastal city.

California has become a global leader on combating climate change and pursuing environmental justice while building a stronger economy, based on clean, renewable energy. Puente would leave a dark, permanent stain on our state's environmental leadership and extend the legacy of injustice that has burdened the Oxnard community for too long.

Corporate polluters, like NRG, target communities like Oxnard because they can. They see the Oxnard coastline as an industrial site, and now they want to pile on with a plant that is dirty, expensive and unfair. Let's call Puente what it really is — another way for corporate interests to profit off of Oxnard's poor residents and people of color.

At a California Energy Commission hearing on Thursday, the agency reviewed a study by the state's grid operator finding clean energy alternatives can meet the region's needs at similar cost, with cleantech experts showing renewables could actually save ratepayers millions of dollars given rapidly falling solar and battery storage costs. The local community showed up en masse to demand the Energy Commission choose an alternative that values clean air for the people of Oxnard.

The California Energy Commission has an obligation to protect all communities. The CEC must reject Puente's application and continue the work of building a clean power system designed for the 21st century. Together, we all must stand united for the clean, sustainable future Oxnard fully deserves.

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