

Green Path North plans withdrawn

Debra Gruszecki • The Desert Sun • March 11, 2010

The controversial Green Path North power line project has been shelved.

Open-space preservationists celebrated the announcement Wednesday by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in separate sessions held in Oak Glen and Yucca Valley to not build a "green" power transmission line through unspoiled desert and wildlife preserves in the San Bernardino Mountains.

"It's an exciting day," April Sall, chairwoman of the California Desert Coalition, said with tears in her eyes.

"It's been a long, three-year effort involving hundreds and thousands of volunteer hours by people who found out about this plan after having experienced the Sawtooth fire."

Hundreds of protesters filled the Yucca Valley Community Center then.

On Wednesday, the celebratory crowd included a core of grassroots organizers who fought tirelessly to quash the transmission project through the Inland Empire.

Applause rumbled through the room when DWP director of environmental affairs Mark Sedlacek said David Freeman, the agency's interim general manager, would recommend supporting legislation proposed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to establish a 134,000-acre Sand to Snow National Monument.

The new area would abut the western boundary of Joshua Tree National Park and include the Big Morongo and Whitewater canyons, the San Gorgonio Wilderness and 23.6 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail.

Its passage would ensure the area would remain pristine, Sall said.

Feinstein's bill also would designate the Whitewater River as a federally protected wild and scenic river, meaning the river would be kept free-flowing. It would also add 2,900 acres to Joshua Tree National Park, prime habitat for endangered species.

Desert Hot Springs City Manager Rick Daniels said this is great news for the city and the Coachella Valley.

"The North-South route took up a large swath of industrial land that would otherwise be used for job creation and economic development," he said.

The plan called for the lines to be plotted behind Mission Lakes Country Club, a resort community on the west side of Desert Hot Springs that is dotted with upscale homes and is an attractive investment area for second-home buyers, retirees and full-time residents.

"It would have been a blemish on the visual landscape up on the mountains," Daniels said. "It would have absorbed a half-mile-wide swath of land that otherwise would have been used for economic development."

Desert Hot Springs Councilman Russell Betts, who attended the news conference, said a lot of people performed a lot of heavy lifting over the years to make this happen.

"The power lines would have been visible in the hills," he said, and the entrance to Desert Hot Springs from Highway 62 would have included a drive under high-power transmission lines.

"We're thrilled to hear the news," said Jack Meyers, whose new home view would have been obstructed if the project cut through Desert Hot Springs. "Hopefully, this will be the end of it."

The Coachella Valley Association of Government in January 2009 passed a resolution to oppose the idea of putting transmission lines through Desert Hot Springs and wildlands in the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and San Bernardino National Forest.

"There is a need to bring geothermal power from Imperial County to Los Angeles County, but there are existing corridors, and that's what they should be looking at," the late Riverside County Supervisor Roy Wilson said at the time.

Vigorous fight

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power had proposed seven potential routes for the project to carry geothermal, wind and solar energy through 80 miles of high-voltage towers and 500-kilovolt transmission lines from Imperial County to Los Angeles and inland cities.

One route cut through Desert Hot Springs and took a path along scenic Highway 62 and the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve north of Palm Springs through Sawtooth, the unspoiled vistas of Pioneertown near Yucca Valley, Pipes Canyon Wilderness Preserve and two flat-top mesas to connect with existing DWP power lines in Hesperia.

Conservationists and environmentalists fought vigorously against the North-South and East-West routes, saying the project would destroy pristine views and scenes that tourists and the movie industry cherish.

They claimed the desert tortoise would be endangered, as would the water sources of migratory birds and Bighorn Peninsular sheep.

Billboards were purchased to urge Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to scrap the plan. A postcard and e-mail campaign also was conducted. The threat of litigation hung in the balance.

David Myers, executive director of The Wildlands Conservancy based in Oak Glen, said the conservancy met with LADWP six weeks ago and was told of the decision to look at other renewable energy alternatives involving an existing transmission line that goes to Owens Dry Lake in the Owens Valley.

It's a preferred plan because the land is already disturbed, Sall said.

In a telephone interview early Wednesday, Myers said of the new plan, "It's a grand experiment in democracy."

"The voices of over 60,000 people that sent letters, post cards and e-mails to the mayor have been heard," Myers said.

"I'm really proud of the residents of the Inland Empire because the DWP tried to pit mountain residents against desert residents to create the path of least resistance."

Instead, Myers said the two sides united to oppose the destruction of scenic wildlands throughout San Bernardino County and propose a viable alternative for Los Angeles to use the existing corridor along Interstate 10.

Precedent set?

Sall said she is encouraged by the direction Los Angeles is taking to consider renewable energy alternatives in the Owens Valley areas that have already been disturbed.

"This was not a NIMBY protest effort," Sall added. "It was a grassroots protest to show there is a more responsible way to do this project."

It's precedent-setting, she said, and it showcases Los Angeles' role in driving responsible land use policy when it comes to energy alternatives.

Freeman's March 10 letter to federal officials said the department would re-evaluate available renewable energy resources throughout Southern California as part of an effort to increase the amount of solar, wind and geothermal power that can replace coal and reduce greenhouse gases.

The city department also asked the federal agencies for reimbursement on any unspent funds that were allocated to the project.

"We're extremely pleased that L.A. saw the light," said Joan Taylor, conservation chair of the local Sierra Club. "Before, they were trying to do the right thing the wrong way. Now, hopefully, they'll do the right thing the right way."

"They can develop renewable energy without putting transmission through pristine areas. I think there's new leadership there, and we like the direction they're going."

Freeman's appointment as interim general manager also helped, Sall said, as he ran the department before and earned a reputation as an administrator who is environmental-friendly.

He's "forward-thinking," she said. "He gets his boots on the ground on the land-use side."

Debra Gruszecki covers business and Indian gaming for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at:

Debra.Gruszecki@thedesertsun.com or 760) 778-4643.