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Power plant company seeks suspension on controversial Santa Paula project

Wendy Leung | Ventura

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A power company wants to suspend its application to build a gas-fired plant near Santa Paula, likely putting the controversial project on hold for the time being.

VC Star.



The Mission Rock Energy Center proposed to be built by Calpine Corp. is seen in the distance of this rendering.

COURTESY OF CALPINE CORP.

In 2015 Calpine Corp. submitted its proposal to build an electrical generating power plant on Mission Rock Road. Now the company wants to suspend its application as it evaluates whether to pull out or modify the Mission Rock Energy Center project.

Citing the recent request for offers on renewable energy projects by Southern California Edison, Calpine stated last week that there does not appear to be an opportunity for the power plant project.

Mission Rock news: Energy commission calls for revised report on Santa Paula power plant proposal

Power plant alternative: Edison's latest plan sees no need for gas-fired power plants in Ventura County

"Since the Mission Rock Energy Center was proposed, California policies and programs relating to grid reliability — particularly local reliability and procurement — have been in transition," wrote attorneys who represent Calpine to the California Energy Commission.

The state commission has the ultimate say on whether the power plant can be built. The commission is expected to respond to the request for an application suspension.

The opposition has been strong ever since the power plant was first proposed. The city of Santa Paula, the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation, elected officials and other community groups have sounded alarms over the perceived environmental impacts of the project.

"It was definitely a bad project from the beginning and we look forward to the day it goes away in its entirety," said Angela Johnson Meszaros, an Earthjustice attorney representing the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation.

The latest development on the Santa Paula proposal follows news the Ormond Beach power plant on an Oxnard beach will cease operations in October. GenOn, a subsidiary of NRG Energy Inc., announced last week that the Ormond plant will close due to economic reasons. The plant was scheduled to cease

operations by 2020 to comply with a state law that prohibits the use of ocean water to cool down power plant operations.

Another Oxnard power plant, the Mandalay Generating Station, was also expected to cease operations in 2020 but closed last year. The eventual demise of both facilities was expected to create a power need in the region, a need supposed to be met by the Santa Paula project.

An application to build a new plant at the Mandalay property to meet that need is also suspended. A committee of the state energy commission indicated it would deny the project.

Instead, the committee supported SCE's solicitation of solar and battery storage to meet the needs of a region that stretches from Santa Barbara County to Santa Clarita.

In its request to the state commission, Calpine noted that until the solicitation from SCE is resolved, it wishes to suspend its power plant application but could resume the process with more market certainty.

"The notion that Calpine is seeking an open-ended suspension seems inappropriate," Meszaros said. "What we anticipate from the committee is that they won't allow an open-ended suspension."

A spokesman for Calpine did not return a call seeking comment.

Michael Ward, spokesman for the energy commission, said Calpine will be asked how long the suspension will be needed. The committee of the commission has up to 21 days to respond to the request for suspension.

Air quality, flooding and habitat destruction were some of the concerns by opponents of the power plant slated near the Santa Clara River. A group of community members formed the Santa Paula Alliance to fight the power plant.

Mary Ann Krause of the Santa Paula Alliance said while fossil fuels still have a place in a state portfolio that includes solar, wind and battery, some of the older power plants will inevitably retire.

"A more balanced portfolio is really the key and I just want to make sure we don't end up with a plant in a wrong location, and that's what Mission Rock is,"

Krause said.

Krause said she was relieved that Calpine wants to suspend its application.

"I'm very hopeful that this will end up in a withdrawal of the application," she said.

Developments from Calpine and NRG point to a closing chapter of fossil fuel reliance, Meszaros said. She believes power companies are realizing that conservation and renewables are meeting the need.

"It's pretty clear where California is going in terms of its policy on how to provide energy for the people of this state," Meszaros said. "Clearly there isn't an energy need for Mission Rock. There wasn't an energy need when they submitted their application and there isn't going to be an energy need. I think it's clear California has reached its tipping point where technology and policy has intersected to show there's no more need for a fossil fuel plant."

Suspension of the application would be positive news for the Santa Clara River and Chumash cultural resources, according to Mati Waiya, founder and executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation.

"Thank you to everyone who has come together to express their opposition and concerns of this harmful peaker power plant," Waiya said in a statement.

"Wishtoyo and Earthjustice will continue to vigorously oppose Calpine's application with the full extent of our resources until it is officially terminated by the California Energy Commission."

Oxnard latest: Ormond Beach power plant to close by October, officials confirm

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