



TUESDAY
March 21, 2006

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

COUNTY FINAL
50¢
PER DAY

Opponents of power line not expected to disappear

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With yesterday's long-anticipated unveiling of the preferred route for San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s Sunrise Powerlink, the big question is whether the fire in the bellies of many opponents of the power line will diminish.

Apparently having listened to complaints from thousands of county residents, the power company has crafted a route for the 500-kilovolt line that minimizes its effects on the most populous areas.

In Ramona, near the San Diego Country Estates, the line will likely be underground, officials said yesterday. In Rancho Peñasquitos, a 230-kilovolt connecting line will also be built below ground in the areas where the most people live. In addition, the proposed route bypasses Julian, Warner Springs and most of Ranchita.

"We have been listening," SDG&E spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said.

Opposition to the line has come from many fronts and still exists. But the focus seems to have shifted from not wanting to live near the 120-to 155-foot-high transmission towers to whether the line is really needed.

SDG&E held two community forums yesterday, in Rancho Peñasquitos and then Ramona, where opposition to the project

had been fierce. But the turnout of opponents yesterday was modest at both gatherings — only a couple dozen in the morning and perhaps 100 in the afternoon.

"They are trying to neutralize the two most populous and two most vehemently opposed groups to the Powerlink," said Kelly Fuller, a spokeswoman for the Sierra Club's San Diego chapter.

One major issue remaining is the line's route through the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, where it would follow the same corridor as an existing but much smaller line.

David Hogan, of the Center for Biological Diversity, said the proposed route "confirms conservationist and communities' worst fears for impacts to nature and people. SDG&E cynically selected the path of least resistance through the heart of the last best natural landscapes in the county."

The board of Anza-Borrego Foundation, which normally does not take political positions, voted unanimously Saturday against the project, saying no route that traverses the state's largest park is acceptable.

"The massive concrete and steel structures required for these power lines would blemish the visual splendor and serenity that defines the park," said Chuck Bennett, a trustee. "These lands are to be held in trust for our heirs and this trust must not be violated."

SDG&E representatives refer to the project as a new "energy superhighway" they say will add a vital link to the state's energy grid and ensure a safe and reliable supply of electricity for the region. Senior Vice President Jim Avery said yesterday the line is needed right now and will save rate payers \$100 million in the long run.

At a project cost of between \$1 billion and \$1.4 billion, the 120-mile high-voltage line will connect the Imperial Valley to San Diego and provide enough power for about 650,000 homes.

Before the precise route was revealed, many people who feared they might live close to it have expressed concerns about visual blight, decreased property values and health risks from electromagnetic fields.