

# NORTH COUNTY TIMES

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## Power line targets Ramona, Anza-Borrego park; avoids Julian

BY: DAVE DOWNEY

STAFF WRITER

NORTH COUNTY ---- After months of anxious anticipation and speculation, area residents now know where San Diego Gas & Electric Co. plans to punch its proposed electricity superhighway through San Diego County 's mountain and desert backcountry.

Unveiled at community meetings in Rancho Penasquitos and Ramona on Monday, the preferred route for the \$1.4 billion Sunrise Powerlink transmission line largely avoids Julian by looping north around the popular resort town.

However, the path for the project's giant, 160-foot "erector-set-like" poles slices through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Ramona, Poway, Scripps Ranch, Rancho Penasquitos and Carmel Valley. There are alternate routes in the state park and Ramona area and the utility says it will refine the alignment by summer.

SDG&E is proposing to build a big substation at either Warner Springs, at the intersection of Highway 79 and S-2, or along Highway 78 about three miles west of Santa Ysabel. To the east of the substation, thick, buzzing wires would sizzle with 500 kilovolts. To the west, 230-kilovolt lines would arc through wilderness and communities.

The utility says the line would deliver 1,000 megawatts to San Diego County, one-fourth of the record total the region

used one day last summer. A megawatt is the standard measuring unit for electricity. It is roughly what it takes to keep the lights on in 750 to 1,000 homes, according to the California Independent System Operator, which oversees the state's electric grid.

Communities and environmental groups immediately denounced the route, saying it would exact a terrible toll on neighborhoods and wildlife.

"SDG&E's preferred Powerlink route confirms conservationists' and communities' worst fears for impacts to nature and people," said David Hogan, urban wildlands program director for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Diego. "SDG&E cynically selected the path of least resistance through the heart of the last best natural landscapes in the county."

At the Ramona meeting Monday evening, however, the electric company encountered plenty of resistance.

With a raised voice from the back row of the Charles Nunn Performing Arts Center, Dan Hutchison of Mesa Grande pointed his finger at SDG&E officials and asked, "Why is it that we have to put up with your towers and your electromagnetic fields for your power? ... We have pristine, beautiful, gorgeous country back here, and you want to run a power line right through it."

Hutchison, a retired math teacher, said it was unsettling to see that the alternate site for a proposed substation in the Warner Springs area fell on his ranch.

Ken Wright of Julian suggested that the line would be particularly shocking to California 's largest state park.

"We have a treasure to the east of us which is irreplaceable," Wright said.

SDG&E officials maintained, however, that they have come up with a plan to tread lightly on the land. And they said they would not have to purchase any homes or relocate families to clear a path for the wires.

Utility spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said the electric company plans to follow corridors of existing lines, albeit much smaller ones, for much of the route, and to put wires under ground in places to avoid neighborhoods. She said wires would be buried for about seven of the route's 120 miles.

Lynn Trexel, principal land adviser for SDG&E, said five of those underground miles would be in the Ramona area, along the north side of San Diego Country Estates and under Creelman Lane. Trexel said an additional two miles would be buried in Rancho Penasquitos, along Highway 56 between Rancho Penasquitos Boulevard and Park Village Drive.

"We knew it was going to come down our street," said Charles Pate, a retired fleet manager who lives on Creelman Lane.

Living next to a buried line is preferable to one overhead, Pate said, but he still has concerns about electromagnetic fields and

the impact of construction.

Pate was among about 200 people who attended the Ramona meeting, which was preceeded by a protest rally in the chilly wind outside.

The rally was punctuated with a short speech by San Diego County Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who represents the Ramona area, and the playing of a folk song that Kathleen Beck of Julian wrote for the occasion.

Accompanied by husband Jim Lydick on guitar and Celia Lawley on violin, she sang, "You want to put your wires in my sky, I can't help but wonder why. Ain't no reason I can find, that will satisfy my mind."

Cy Conrad, a retired physician who lives in Ranchita, said he couldn't help but wonder why the entire length of the line couldn't be buried.

But David Geier, SDG&E vice president of electric transmission, said that while 230-kilovolt lines can be placed in the ground, 500-kilovolt wires can't. Geier said the larger wires are more efficient than smaller ones at transporting power over long distances, and burying a line costs five to 10 times more than stringing one from a pole.

The proposed line would begin at the Imperial Valley Substation south of Interstate 8 in Imperial County and terminate at the Penasquitos Substation southeast of Interstate 5 and Highway 56.

"There are mitigations from beginning to end, in almost every section of the line," said Jim Avery, vice president of SDG&E's electric operations.

Donovan said the utility, however, has not determined how many residential properties the line would cross in its meandering trek from desert to sea.

SDG&E, which powers 1.2 million homes and 100,000 businesses in San Diego County and southern Orange County, is seeking the green light from the Califor-

nia Public Utilities Commission to begin building the project in 2008 and bring it online by 2010.

SDG&E officials maintain that the power line is needed to prevent a forecast shortfall by 2010 and meet a state requirement to provide 20 percent of its power by then from so-called renewable sources, such as wind, solar and geothermal. The utility gets 6 percent now from such sources.

Geothermal technology uses steam from natural underground geysers to produce electricity, and solar panels harness the raw power of the sun.

Conservationists contend there are other ways to boost the region's power supply and increase reliance on renewable sources that don't scar oak-covered mountains and wildflower-carpeted desert canyons. They note that a regional task force a couple of years ago called for half of the region's future renewable energy to be produced within San Diego County.

Conservationists argue that a focus on local plants would negate the need for a transmission line.

Avery disagrees.

"The region needs both," he said. "It needs transmission and it needs generation."

Opponents suggest the transmission is more about opening up markets for the generators SDG&E's parent company built across the border in Mexico.

"The project will promote Semptra Energy's polluting fossil-fuel power plants in Mexico, which in turn contribute to global warming, dodge U.S. air pollution laws and discourage competing renewable energy development," said Kelly Fuller, who is tracking the project for the Sierra Club's San Diego County Chapter.

Conservationists also have criticized the high cost. But Avery said the line would save the utility more than \$100 million a year and trigger a rate reduction.

"As soon as it comes on line, it will pro-

vide benefits and savings for our customers," he said.