



FRIDAY
February 9, 2007

The San Diego

Union-Tribune.

COUNTY FINAL
50¢
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Hundreds fill hearings on power line plans

Opponents urge state officials to keep 150-mile route out of Anza-Borrego park

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STAFF WRITER

BORREGO SPRINGS – Some wore yellow bandanas imprinted with the words “Save Anza-Borrego Say NO to Sunrise Powerlink.”

A tour of the proposed Powerlink route in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park yesterday stopped near an Indian rock circle that likely dates thousands of years.

They were part of more than 400 people who packed a meeting hall last night. Many attended to express their dismay over plans to construct the major power transmission line through the heart of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

People came from throughout the county, state and elsewhere to attend the only hearing before the state Parks Commission to explain why they oppose San Diego Gas & Electric’s proposed transmission line, a \$1.3 billion, 150-mile project the utility says is critical to ensure electric reliability for the region. It says the line will link renewable energy sources built in the Imperial Valley to San Diego County.

Earlier in the day, a different crowd nearly filled the same room at the Borrego Springs Resort for a meeting with representatives of the California Public Utilities Commission. The PUC is trying to decide if the line is needed, and if it is, exactly what route it should take. Those decisions are expected early next year.

Park commissioners listened for hours last night, first to SDG&E Vice President Jim Avery, who told them running a transmission line through the park is the only option if the region is to avoid an energy shortfall by 2010.

Numerous public speakers later, representing various chambers of commerce, as well as labor unions, voiced support.

But far more people pleaded with commissioners to take a stand against the line.

“If SDG&E is successful, every park in the nation will be vulnerable to development,” said Carolyn Morrow, whose Ranchita home lies a few hundred yards off the proposed route through Grapevine Canyon just west of the park.

Throughout the day, five of nine park commissioners, down from Sacramento, toured the entire 23 miles of the proposed route through the Anza-Borrego park.

“I’m down here to get as much information as I can get from the people who know the most,” said Park Commission Chairman Bobby Shriver.

Traveling in a caravan of a dozen four-wheel-drive vehicles, the commissioners, state park employees, SDG&E representatives and interested observers, virtually all of whom oppose Powerlink, followed the path. For the most part, the route would be along an existing 69-kilovolt SDG&E line built in the 1920s.

The utility wants to widen its 100-foot easement to 150 feet for the 500-kilovolt Powerlink. That would allow it to straighten the route, which now crisscrosses state Route 78 five times.

SDG&E Technical Project manager Jonathan Woldemariam told the commissioners the existing line has 275 poles, from 40 to 60 feet high, through the park. That would be reduced to 141 steel towers, as

tall as 135 feet, if the utility's plan is approved, and the line would be kept to one side of the highway. If it has to stay within its existing easement, SDG&E officials say, there would be more and taller steel towers.

The proposal, however, would require the de-designation of wilderness area along the route, both for widening the easement and for building outside it in some places.

One stop during yesterday's tour was in the San Felipe Wash more than a mile south of the highway directly beneath one of the poles. Fifteen feet away was an American Indian rock circle, built probably thousands of years ago.

Carmen Lucas, an elder from a splinter band of the Kumeyaay Indians, told the commissioners that the desert is a sacred place to her people.

"I want you to understand the sophisticated intellect that lived and worked here," she said. "I have an obligation to my ancestors to honor and respect them."

The PUC hearing at Borrego Springs Resort was one of eight scheduled this week in the county, and in El Centro and Temecula. The meeting drew nearly 200 people, far more than any of the other hearings this week, in places such as Ramona, Rancho Peñasquitos, Julian and Boulevard.

Those who attended yesterday's session were passionate and unilaterally opposed to the line, most focusing on the importance of keeping the state's largest park pristine.

"Wilderness once de-designated can never be returned," said Diana Lindsay, vice president of the Anza-Borrego Foundation and Institute.

Lane Sharman, founder of the Borrego Water Exchange, choked up as he spoke. "Many more eloquent than me will call for the wild of Anza Borrego," Sharman said.

"They will call for its sanctity, fragility, its biodiversity, its message of bounty in the Spartan edge of the Sonoran. ... You do not want to hear the

cry of generations of Californians, of families like mine, who have given time, money, land and covenants to keep Anza-Borrego wild and free of colossal footprints like Sunrise. Please, do not just listen but hear the call of the wild."

Larry Hogue, author of a book about the park, "All the Wild and Lonely Places: Journeys in a Desert Landscape," asked the commission not to force him to rename the book "Journeys in a Power Corridor."

Others were more concerned about the proximity of the proposed line to their homes and property.

"This is not a case of 'not in my backyard,' " said homeowner Jay Price, who lives on county Highway S-2. "It's a case of it would go through my front yard and over my house."

Price suggested that the line be built next to the U.S.-Mexican border. "Then they wouldn't have to build a fence," he said.