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SDG&E adds players to Sunrise team

BY: DAVE DOWNEY

STAFF WRITER

San Diego Gas & Electric Co. is teaming up with the Imperial Irrigation District and Boston-based Citizens Energy Corp. on the proposed \$1.4 billion, 120-mile Sunrise Powerlink transmission line that would run between Imperial County and Carmel Valley, an SDG&E official said Thursday.

Utility spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said the San Diego electric company has signed an agreement that gives Imperial Irrigation and Citizens Energy ---- whose chairman is former U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II ---- the opportunity to build and own the eastern half of the line.

She said SDG&E would in turn build and own the western half, including sections through San Diego, Ramona and the North County mountain backcountry. SDG&E announced its preferred route Monday.

Donovan said the pact will trigger a filing in a couple of months of a supplemental application with the California Public Utilities Commission. SDG&E filed an original application with the commission in December.

The prospect of a supplemental application could affect the outcome of a preliminary decision SDG&E had sought.

In December, the utility took the unprecedented approach of asking the commission to break its application into two distinct

parts, and rule separately on whether there was a need for the 1,000 megawatts the project would provide to San Diego County before deciding whether to approve the power line. Conservation groups and community activists adamantly opposed the move.

In a letter penned Tuesday and addressed to the commission, SDG&E President and Chief Executive Officer Debra L. Reed wrote: "Due to these recent events, we are open to following whatever regulatory process and procedural schedule that you believe will best ensure that we can still receive a CPUC decision by mid-2007."

Opponents took that to mean SDG&E was backing down on its request to have an independent ruling on power need before the commission addresses the merits of the project itself.

"There has been so much public outcry in the last three months that SDG&E had to admit defeat and change its game plan," said Kelly Fuller, who is tracking the project for the San Diego County chapter of the Sierra Club.

David Hogan, urban wildlands director for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Diego, said, "SDG&E saw the writing on the wall and has changed course in response to effective opposition."

Donovan disagreed.

"Their characterization is absolutely not correct," she said.

On the other hand, Donovan said that the supplemental application could render irrelevant the utility's original request to break up the issue into two parts and issue a pair of independent rulings. As a result, the commission likely will receive information about the need, the project's merits and its environmental impacts all at the same time, she said.