

Power to the People

Published: Tuesday, December 4, 2007 8:03 PM PST

<http://voiceofsandiego.org/articles/2007/12/06/cafesandiego/955powers120507.txt>

San Diego's principal natural energy asset is the sun, but we barely use it for power generation or water heating. San Diego's principal natural challenge is fire, fire on such a scale that it has the potential to isolate us from the wider electric world at the worst possible time. Yet we continue to import more and more of our power needs over vulnerable transmission lines as if daring nature to call our bluff.

The state has wonderful legislation and guidelines to lead us to a cleaner, greener energy future. In fact, the world sees California as a leader in green energy because of these far-sighted policies. The reality on the ground is quite different. A recent quote by Commissioner John Geesman of the California Energy Commission sums it up: "*There's an ongoing schizophrenia in state energy policy between what we say we want to do and what we actually allow to happen.*" Commissioner Geesman has a clear picture of the current situation.

A local lesson has been that private parties may not be the best candidates to design and implement energy plans. Sempra Energy, SDG&E's parent company, settled a class-action lawsuit over natural gas pricing abuses during the 2000-01 energy "crisis" for \$580 million in early 2006. Sempra was also fined \$70 million in 2006 for breaching the terms of its long-term power supply contract with the state that evolved out the crisis. In the same proceeding, Sempra was admonished to stop artificially congesting San Diego area transmission lines. Not surprisingly, "relief of transmission congestion" has been one of SDG&E's mantras in promoting the need for what could be the biggest energy infrastructure project in San Diego's history, the 500 kV Sunrise Powerlink transmission line.

The state returned to SDG&E the responsibility to chart San Diego's long-term energy strategy in 2003 after a brief and eventful "let the market decide" interlude. Sempra has bet its financial future on remote natural gas-fired power plants, associated transmission infrastructure, and liquefied natural gas imports. It is not realistic to expect that any energy plan developed by SDG&E will challenge the strategic objectives of its parent Sempra. It is realistic to assume that any plan developed by SDG&E will compliment the objectives of the parent company.

The two main urban centers in California do not have this problem. Los Angeles is supplied by its own public utility, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). "Public utility" means it is under at least the nominal control of the city administration. Public officials in Los Angeles, aware of the overwhelming public support for renewable energy, have committed LADWP to achieving 35 percent renewable energy by 2020, far above the current state mandate of 20 percent for investor-owned utilities like SDG&E. San Francisco has formed its own public power generation entity and has established a renewable energy target of 51 percent by 2017. In contrast, SDG&E/Sempra lobbied successfully to kill legislation earlier this year that would have raised the renewable energy mandate to 33 percent by 2020 for investor-owned utilities.

The people of San Diego need to have a stronger role in determining our energy future. California law allows cities to take responsibility for energy generation through the "community choice aggregation" legislation passed in 2002. This is the basis for the ambitious San Francisco energy program. Community choice aggregation would provide an excellent vehicle for adapting our energy generation mix to the unique advantages and challenges of the San Diego area. It would also place maximum emphasis where the state says it should be -- greenhouse gas reduction and local power generation. The alternative is an energy future dominated by *"ongoing schizophrenia."*

-- BILL POWERS