

Did You Know That San Francisco Is Preparing To Build New Fossil Fuel-Burning Power Plants?

San Francisco, the self-described “greenest city in America,” is poised to build \$300 million worth of new natural gas combustion turbine power plants beginning in May 2008.

Even worse than the obvious contradiction that the power plant proposal creates for San Francisco is the fact that three of the four power plants will be built in the middle of the city’s low-income and mostly minority Bayview-Hunters Point and Potrero neighborhoods.

The question is: how has a project opposed by the Sierra Club, Green for All, the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, and nearly every environmental and public interest organization that has studied the issue come to be within a single vote by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors from implementation?

Remnants of the California Energy Crisis

The plan for these new power plants is a vestige of the California Energy Crisis of 2000-2001, underscoring the continued inefficiencies in regional power grids and our nation’s overall inability to adapt to the need to curb global warming and embrace renewable energy.

In 2001, California’s then-Governor Gray Davis issued a call for 1,000 megawatts of new power plants to meet electricity needs during peak demand periods. San Francisco currently relies on the 45-year-old Potrero Power Plant, owned by the Mirant Corporation, for its peak energy.

By 2004 the City of San Francisco had crafted a plan to build two new power plants using combustion turbines it received in an Energy Crisis-era legal settlement. The idea was that the California Independent System Operator (Cal-ISO), charged with maintaining the regional electrical grid, would designate the new power plants for San Francisco reliability, allowing the older Potrero Plant to close.

In 2008, Reliability Through Renewable Energy And A Smarter Power Grid

Despite our nation’s widespread consciousness of the need to address global warming and halt the construction of unnecessary sources of greenhouse gas emissions, San Francisco’s power plant proposal has lumbered onward, unchanged, for four years. San Francisco is woefully behind in developing a renewable generation portfolio, and its commitment to the proposed new power plants is partly to blame.

On this issue, San Francisco is seen to act in blind deference to a Cal-ISO which, like most regional ISO’s, employs outdated and fossil fuel-heavy models that have led to an overstressed and misaligned power grid. San Francisco has even been hesitant to engage the Cal-ISO to confirm that the new Trans Bay Cable transmission line, which will increase the city’s available energy by 40% in 2010, and a combination of investment in efficiency, demand response and renewables eliminates the need for conventional power plants.

There is widespread consensus that the aging Potrero Plant must be closed, but rather than challenging the Cal-ISO and taking a leadership role in creating a smarter power grid with open access for renewable resources such as solar, wind, and geothermal power, San Francisco instead chooses to acquiesce to antiquated notions of what “reliable” energy is.

That San Francisco plans to build new greenhouse gas- and pollution-emitting power plants amongst its environmental justice communities gives further cause for environmentalists around the country to urge San Francisco to abandon either its power plant proposal or its “greenest city” self-description.