

South Coast making a power play

By [Marissa Nall](#) / Friday, March 29th, 2019 /

Utility provider Southern California Edison plans to make its final decision on 80 to 95 megawatts of new energy projects for Ventura and Santa Barbara counties in April, but South Coast communities say that isn't enough.

Santa Barbara, Carpinteria and Goleta have set lofty 100 percent renewable energy goals by 2030. Moreover, the recent disasters stemming from the Thomas fire and Montecito mudslides alerted officials to the risk of being cut off from power in the event of an emergency, prompting them to lay out plans for an island of clean energy on the South Coast.

That means sourcing much more energy than the SEC solicitation calls for – as much as 200 megawatts – as well as 400 megawatt-hours of battery storage. It also could mean bending some of the rules to experiment a little.

The Montecito Fire Protection District kicked off the effort in late February, taking steps toward building its own microgrid that would keep critical resources online in the event of an emergency or long-term outage. Santa Barbara County and the cities of Santa Barbara, Goleta and Carpinteria later presented drafts of their strategic energy plans for 2030 at a stakeholder symposium March 14.

While it would still be connected to the main grid, a microgrid in Montecito could disconnect and run indefinitely on battery and renewable power, according to information provided by the Clean Coalition, which has partnered with the district on the effort.

The coalition's plan would eventually expand the microgrid to commercial buildings in the Montecito Upper Village and partway into the city of Santa Barbara. Future deployments would prioritize the Montecito Water District and other resources like communications infrastructure and emergency shelters.

The microgrid is just “the initial building block for a much broader opportunity in what we call the Goleta load pocket,” said Clean Coalition Executive Director Craig Lewis.

The area is entirely reliant on the Goleta substation, he said. In the event of an emergency like the debris flows in January 2018, transmission lines to the station could be disrupted, cutting off power to more than 60 miles of coastline from Carpinteria to Point Conception.

“They’re in the middle of the highest fire risk, mudslide risk and earthquake risk,” Lewis said. “It’s just a totally vulnerable transmission line.”

Originally, SCE looked to source up to 318 megawatts of power by 2021, after a proposal to build a natural gas-fired power plant in Oxnard was shelved. Then, a transmission line between Moorpark and Santa Clarita won approval from the California Public Utilities Commission, and SCE refined its target down to 80 to 90 megawatts to meet energy reliability mandates from the state.

It also set a “resiliency” goal above state mandates to source around 95 megawatts in the Goleta area, which would also serve the broader Moorpark area requirements if the utility can procure them. Communities are instead proposing a much more robust system in the Goleta area.

An energy resilience standard is “way harder to solve for,” Lewis said. “To solve for energy resilience, you need to have local generation.”

SCE said in a statement to the Business Times that it is currently concluding negotiations for clean energy projects to address the two goals. Once it makes the final awards, they would go to the CPUC for approval, and the company plans to conduct a public briefing on the outcome in April.

It said it doesn’t currently plan to reevaluate its energy targets for the Moorpark system, because the solicitation process “is anticipated to meet all of its currently defined reliability requirements,” the statement said. “SCE will continue to consider options for enhancing its Goleta sub-area resiliency needs.”

Plans by the Clean Coalition and city and county officials would call for follow-on procurements by SCE of 200 megawatts of solar energy production and 400 megawatt-hours of storage sited within the Goleta load pocket, Lewis said.

“The Montecito microgrid is the first building block, and the fire district site is the first step.”

Despite being a relatively small portion of the overall Moorpark Sub Area, anything sited within the Goleta load pocket is a twofer, he said, solving for everyday energy needs outlined by SCE and resilience in the event of an emergency.

Without large areas of open land for solar development, that means finding opportunities for many small projects in parking lots and on rooftops. It would also need to find some creative financing.

At a meeting of some 150 stakeholders in Santa Barbara March 14, officials highlighted the need to bring in large property owners within the business community. Attendees also noted a fundamental tension between the owners as decision makers, and renters — a larger portion of the population who are likely paying for the utility and might not know how to engage their landlords on the projects.

“If you don’t own the property, it’s really difficult to make strategic choices about your energy use there,” said Byron Pakter, senior program manager at consulting firm Optony, which hosted the symposium. “So, it’s really important to reach out not only to the residential community but the business community.”

Solar developers proposed waiving permitting fees for renewable projects and doing fewer, randomized inspections to cut time and costs.

They also recommended creative financing options like on-bill financing through the utility, a low-interest revolving loan fund or a feed-in tariff that would pay project owners a fixed rate for the energy they produce.

Some neighborhoods, like the so-called Lagoon District in Santa Barbara, contain assets like food, banking and a desalination plant that could serve as clean energy laboratories under the city’s plan.

Doing so would follow the lead of programs in Austin, Texas and Brooklyn, but might require the city to bend policy rules to “test the new things in a controlled environment,” said Jerry Estrada, general manager of the Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District.

A shifting relationship, with the threat of Community Choice Energy programs looming over the utility, is giving cities more input in renewable energy generation, Pakter said. But cities will still need to tighten their own budgets to find the funds.

“None of these things make money on their own,” he said. “It requires investment in the coming years.”