

Could SunZia supply SEC?

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Scott Turner – El Defensor Chieftain Editor - Jul 6, 2017 Updated Jul 6, 2017

Socorro Electric Cooperative could eventually be among the users of the energy generated by the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project.

That was an opinion expressed by SunZia Project Manager Tom Wray at the Socorro County Board of Commissioners public hearing last week about county roads that could be used for the project.

“One of our partners is Tri-State (Generation and Transmission), which supplies the Co-op with electricity,” Wray said.

Wray told county commissioners that Tri-State could build substations that could tie into the transmission lines that would supply “high quality wind energy to the Co-op and other co-ops around the state.”

The commissioners – however – were skeptical that Socorro County residents would benefit from the energy generated from the wind farm near Corona in Lincoln County.

The energy is to be transported along a 515-mile route to a hub in Palo Verde, Arizona, west of Phoenix, that could serve customers in California and Arizona.

“Almost a guaranty doesn’t mean anything,” District 4 County Commissioner Glen Duggins said.

Wray conceded he couldn’t speak for Tri-State.

Although Tri-State is listed as a partner on the project, SunZia official John Ryan told The Chieftain following a previous commission meeting that he didn’t know the nature of the partnership or whether Tri-State intended to use the project as a source of energy it supplies.

Commissioners are just as skeptical about other benefits suggested by SunZia and Pattern Energy officials. Pattern Energy is the project’s anchor user.

Jobs promised

At a previous meeting, Ryan cited a New Mexico State-University of Arizona study that the project would bring 760 jobs to Socorro County and \$5.5 million in tax revenue during the five years of construction.

Wray said last week that an updated study would be released in four months and said the results of the study would be shared with the commissioners.

Commission Vice Chair Pauline Jaramillo asked Wray how committed project officials were to hiring local residents.

“We’re going to be hiring as much local labor as we can, because it’s in our best interest to do so,” Wray said. “People aren’t going to want to commute from Deming to work on the project. ... We’re also going to be utilizing local vendors.”

Wray also said non-local residents working on the project would be staying in hotels in Socorro and eating at local restaurants “because there would be no other places to stay.”

The commissioners voiced a concern that the previous study found few permanent jobs in Socorro County would be created by the project.

Pattern Energy Senior Director Ward Marshall cited statistics of what the project would do permanently in Lincoln and Torrance counties, where the wind farm would be located.

Duggins said he could see how the project would be good “for our neighbors in Lincoln County.”

“But I want to know what it is going to do for Socorro County,” Duggins said.

Marshall said he didn’t believe Lincoln and Torrance counties would be able to fill all of the permanent jobs, and that some of the jobs would be filled by residents of neighboring counties, including Socorro.

Duggins asked Marshall about job training for local residents.

“We support hiring from local community colleges that provide that kind of training,” Marshall said.

Among the other benefits touted by Wray is the ability of the project to provide infrastructure to bring broadband internet to the community, which has been an issue of contention between the City of Socorro and the Co-op. The project’s ability to provide the service to the community has attracted the interest of New Mexico Tech officials, Wray said.

Other concerns

Commissioners and county residents — however — have other concerns about the project.

Property owner Oliver Lee raised concerns at previous commission meetings about what construction of the project would do to county roads. County officials have also expressed concerns about the issue — which led to last week’s public hearing.

County officials are considering an ordinance that would limit roads in the eastern part of the county that could be used for the project’s construction to their historical use. It would limit heavy truck traffic on Socorro County Roads 127, 152, 147, 131 and 181. County Road 121 could also be added to the list.

County Attorney Adren Nance said the roads do not have rights-of-way. If the ordinance passes, users of the roads would have to seek permission from the county and property owners on both sides of the roads to expand them.

Wray said it was the intent of SunZia officials to seek agreements to repair the roads to their previous condition or improve them after the project is completed.

Commissioners are also concerned about what the project would do to property values of the land the lines will run through.

District 3 Commissioner Manuel Anaya asked Wray to explain how property owners would be compensated for rights-of-way through their property.

Wray said the compensation being offered was based on appraisals based on fair market value.

“Not all lands are alike,” Wray said. “Some have greater grazing capacity. Some have more surface water available. Properties in the same area would probably bring similar compensation. Underground (lines) has a greater impact than (lines) just overhead.”

Anaya asked if ranchers were talking to each other about what is being offered.

“That is up to them,” Wray said.

He said SunZia officials have been asked not to publicize what is being negotiated.

“The real value of the ranch is its pristine beauty,” Duggins said, “not how much the cows can graze.”

Anaya and Commission Chair Martha Salas again raised questions about how the project would affect training and testing at White Sands Missile Range. The route runs through the northern edge of the call-up area.

Property owner Daniel Sais expressed a concern the project could cost the missile range testing opportunities and jobs.

Wray said project officials have been working with Department of Defense and White Sands officials, pointing out the agreement from underground lines.

Magdalena resident Naomi Dawson wanted to know what the project would do to wildlife along the route.

“I have not heard anything about the environmental impact on the cranes, the antelope and elk,” Dawson said. “What is this project going to do to the flora and fauna of this state?”