

Locals boo Green Path, Los Angeles power manager

By Rebecca Unger / Hi-Desert Star Wednesday, July 23, 2008 12:12 AM PDT

YUCCA VALLEY — It was a tough room for Los Angeles Department of Water and Power General Manager David Nahai and his coalition of Green Path North boosters Saturday. The multipurpose room at Yucca Valley High School was overflowing with a wide cross-section of Hi-Desert citizens who had come to let Los Angeles know what they thought about an energy corridor proposed to cut through 85 miles of Morongo Basin homes and habitats.

The path through the Hi-Desert is one of six Nahai said is being explored by his department to get geothermal energy from the Salton Sea into Los Angeles.

“We need to access geothermal energy because global warming is a reality,” Nahai told the audience. “We’re putting too much carbon dioxide into the air.” Nahai said the Department of Water and Power must reduce its reliance on coal and other non-renewable energy sources, as mandated by California legislation in the Senate and Assembly.

By 2020, the state will require all utilities to be getting 33 percent of their electricity from renewable sources. Los Angeles has set even more ambitious goals.

In solidarity with his cause were the executive director of the Southern California Public Power Authority, who brought along representatives from member cities Burbank, Glendale, Riverside and Banning and the Imperial Irrigation District.

“We are at the forefront of a national debate that pits environmental values against each other,” opined Nahai, who seemed to draw a distinction between the global environmental good served by renewable energies and the local environmental good.

Nahai said his purpose in coming to Yucca Valley was to address the Basin’s speculations and suspicions about the project, as well as the “myth that L.A.’s not doing its part.”

But when California Desert Coalition chairwoman April Sall was given her chance to talk, she told Nahai, “There is a way to do this better.”

She told Nahai her organization appreciated the opportunity to talk over Green Path alternatives, “But David, you and the department need to understand the department has a reputation for steamrolling smaller communities, and we have a lot to protect and a lot to fight for here.”

Nahai came under attack almost immediately once public comments got under way. Some of the participants took the opportunity to vent at the general manager, but others asked serious questions, searching for details about the project.

When Eldon Hughes, of Joshua Tree, asked if the LADWP’s new application to the Bureau of Land Management rescinded earlier requests for a right-of-way through Morongo Valley, Nahai would only say his agency’s application “superseded” a previous one.

A Pioneertown resident asked about the percentage of energy Los Angeles receives from a nuclear power plant in Arizona. Nahai was quick to answer that while Los Angeles gets 8 percent of its total energy load from the nuclear plant, none of that would be coming through Green Path.

Bighorn-Desert View Water Agency Director Duane Lisiewski took the LADWP to task for a project where “only L.A. benefits, we get nothing, and it will destroy the value of my home.” Nahai defended the project, saying, “It’s just wrong that only L.A. will benefit” by a project that will cut greenhouse emissions.

Bill Boyce from Yucca Valley observed, “There appears to be very little respect for us. You’re asking us to pay the differential in our quality of life.”

A retired electrical engineer used a large sketch pad to illustrate some problems he saw with using the Salton Sea as Green Path's geothermal source. "Steam comes from water pumped in," he explained. "Money should come back to rebuild the Salton Sea, and it can be refilled by the Sea of Cortez. You would use less Colorado River water. Desalination plants would create jobs, and it could be an oasis."

Nahai called the Salton Sea's potential geothermal resource "God's gift."

"Electricity seeks the path of least resistance," said crowd-pleasing speaker Scott McKone. "These routes are the path of most resistance — the people's resistance!"

One of the concerns was about the cumulative affects of Green Path and several other energy projects with applications into the BLM. "Your project is one of many that will impact our desert," said a man identified as Roger of Lucerne.

Nahai contended if Green Path's lines went through heavily urban areas instead, the LADWP would have to use eminent domain to seize thousands of homes and businesses.

Nicole Panter of Twentynine Palms urged those present to "remember Owens Valley." She soon created the crowd's rallying cry: "What's in it for us?"

As more speakers described the LADWP and by extension Nahai as untrustworthy and disingenuous, Nahai appeared to be losing his earlier cool. "I didn't have to come here today," he said, prompting a chorus of sarcastic groans. "I came for constructive comments."

The final jab came from William Hampton at the back of the room: "How dare you come here and upset all of these people? We don't want it!"