

Power lines get locals all wired up

Residents, nature preserve not keen on Visalia-area location.

By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee

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FARMERSVILLE — Residents near the path of a proposed high-voltage power line between Lemon Cove and Visalia weren't shy with their opinions Wednesday evening.

Many of the more than 100 people at an open house held by Southern California Edison for the San Joaquin Cross Valley Loop transmission line objected to plans to string two circuits of 220,000-volt lines on about 120 steel towers covering 20 miles.

Edison officials say the line is needed to provide additional electricity from the company's Big Creek hydroelectric project in eastern Fresno County to Visalia. The line would connect a main transmission line in the foothills near Lemon Cove to a major Edison substation in southeast Visalia.

Among those concerned are representatives of the Sequoia Riverlands Trust, which operates the 311-acre Kaweah Oaks Preserve east of Visalia. Board Member Brian Newton wanted to find out just how close the line's route would come to the nature preserve.

The proposed line, on towers 120 to 140 feet tall, would miss the preserve's western edge by about a quarter-mile. And while the group has not taken an official position on Edison's proposal, Sequoia Riverlands Trust communications director Johanna Lombard said there still may be two reasons to worry.

"First would be the 'viewshed,' or how these towers and lines would affect the view of our riparian oak forest," she said. "That's a rarity here in the San Joaquin Valley, and we wouldn't want it to be spoiled."

Wildlife is also a concern. "Even if it's not on the preserve, animals don't stay in one place; they move around," Lombard said. "We don't know if wildlife corridors would be affected."

Next door to the preserve is the meeting house for the Visalia Friends Meeting, better known as Quakers.

The line's proposed route is about 350 feet from the meeting hall at Road 172 and Mineral King Avenue. That's a little too close for worshippers.

"The lines literally go right by the front door of our meeting house," said David Chandler, the Quakers' meeting clerk. He said the congregation and neighbors are concerned about the possible health effects of electromagnetic fields from the high-power lines.

Even if research is inconclusive on whether such fields are harmful, Chandler said, there are risks. "And people will definitely be disrupted sociologically, if not physically," he said.

Chandler and others expressed hope for an alternate route to the north that courses primarily over agricultural land rather than near the Highway 198 corridor.

"We don't want it in our backyard, but we don't want to put it in anyone else's backyard either," Chandler said.

Bill DeLain, Edison's region manager, maintained a smile even while enduring several earfuls of criticism. He said he was pleased to see so much public interest in the project.

"For most of the people, it's not a question of whether the project is needed," DeLain said. "But they want to know how it affects them and their immediate neighbors, and their concerns are very personal and heartfelt."

The company will apply in December to the state Public Utilities Commission for approval for the cross-valley line.

DeLain said that will mark the start of a 15- to 18-month process that will likely involve public hearings locally and other opportunities for residents to express their opinions about the project, including possible alternatives.

The reporter can be reached at tsheehan@fresnobee.com or (559) 622-2410.