

Why S.F. should shelve 'peaker plants' idea

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We are facing a major decision - whether to spend a quarter of a billion dollars on new fossil-fuel burning power plants in our city, or to initiate a program that provides incentives to install solar on rooftops citywide. The juxtaposition of approving polluting power plants while stalling a modest solar program puts at risk San Francisco's reputation as an innovator and leader in climate change.



The city is considering a proposal to install four peaker power plants that will run on natural gas and be used when our energy grid needs power. The peakers were originally a part of a deal to help close an existing power plant in Potrero Hill. While the peakers were given to the city as part of a legal settlement, the cost to install them is now \$238 million and could grow further.

Meanwhile, a \$3 million pilot solar incentive program that is stalled in City Hall would provide cash incentives to city residents who install solar. This would jump-start San Francisco's solar industry and provide needed green-collar jobs. It could nearly double the installation of solar on private rooftops in just the first year alone by leveraging \$15 million in state and federal incentives and private investment.

We think it's time to reconsider the peakers but move forward on the solar program. Here's why:

1. Clean energy is a better investment for our residents, environment and economy. Launching the solar program would lead to solar firms relocating to the city and the creation of hundreds of green-collar jobs at living wages. One of the largest solar installers in the country, Solar City, has pledged to open its national solar job training academy in the Bayview if San Francisco moves ahead with its solar incentive program. If not, the company is very likely to locate in San Jose.
2. The peakers are unnecessary. We can meet the same level of energy reliability through a combination of new supply and reduced demand. This includes a new Transbay cable that opens in 2010 and will bring three times the energy as the peakers (and could in the future export clean energy from San Francisco to surrounding communities). Ways to further reduce our need for additional fossil fuel energy include the hundreds of millions in energy efficiency investments, demand management programs (where users voluntarily agree to have their energy reduced during peak times), new green building standards, and the growth of local clean energy, primarily solar.
3. The peakers are polluting. Annually, they would emit about the same level of dangerous greenhouse gases as the current Potrero power plant's main natural gas unit does today. Residents of nearby Potrero Hill and Bayview Hunters Point have for too long borne the negative health impacts of existing power plants.

Why are people pushing for the peakers? A combination of reasons. Some hope it will pave the way for public power. Others see this as the fastest way to close the Potrero power plant. Some say that the state requires it. But this logic is faulty. The state's assessment was made before new supply and energy reduction measures were taken into account. This means we have to reconsider the case for the peakers.

But if we advance fossil fuel power today while the solar program stalls, we are turning back the clock to old polluting technology.

Let's insist on a clean energy future with green-collar jobs. This befits our role as an innovative and forward-looking city. San Franciscans deserve nothing less.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/22/EDHP1096GP.DTL>

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