

Power line fight heats up

By Journal North Editorial Staff

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PNM's Norton substation on Old Buckman Road north of Santa Fe would be the southern terminus of the proposed Verde Transmission Line. (EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL)

SANTA FE, N.M. — The burgeoning fight over a 33-mile power line segment proposed to run from southern Rio Arriba County to a spot north and west of Santa Fe on Old Buckman Road is just the latest example of how northern New Mexico is a different kind of place.

On the national scene, Native Americans and other people from around the country have rallied to support the Standing Rock Sioux protesters in North Dakota who, for now, have fought off plans for an oil pipeline the tribe fears could threaten its water supply and would run through a sacred tribal burial ground.

But here at home, three Native American pueblos are the biggest local supporters of another big energy project — a Texas company's proposed high-voltage Verde Transmission Line, which would carry 345 kilovolts on wires supported by five to seven 90- to 120-foot-tall towers per mile. It would run through the populated Jacona/El Rancho area west of Pojoaque, on non-pueblo land.

At a recent public hearing in Hernandez, north of Española and near the proposed line's northern terminus at an existing PNM substation, it was a 7-year-old Anglo girl who said the proposed transmission line would harm "sacred land" while standing in front of her own drawing of power line towers spoiling the view of San Ildefonso Pueblo's landmark Black Mesa. Opponents say the power line will run about 1,600 feet, or about a third of a mile, north of the mesa.

The power line would not cross San Ildefonso land. Three other pueblos — Pojoaque, Ohkay Owingeh and Santa Clara — will be paid for use of right of way or easements across their land as the path for the transmission line. Leaders of those pueblos portray the line as economic development.

Opponents say it will ruin landscapes that make northern New Mexico attractive to tourists and filmmakers. And the people who would have to live near the power lines are worried about the effect on property values, and possibly on health, from the big towers.

The line's proponents make a case that this segment of transmission line will improve the movement of electrical

power around the grid, eliminating a bottleneck where a lower-capacity line now serves. What's so far less clear is how the high-voltage line would help those who'd have to put up with the big towers and the power lines not far from their homes, and whether the higher voltage lines would translate into any usable infrastructure for local economic development beyond the easement payments to the pueblos.

Is this a case of "not in my backyard?" Well, maybe, but the prospect of 120-foot towers carrying 345 kilovolts in your backyard is pretty hard to dismiss, particularly with a dearth of specifics about how the transmission line would help you or your neighbors.

The Bureau of Land Management is involved because part of the line's route goes across BLM land. The agency would have to approve the use of its land for the project.

As the debate moves forward, the transmission line's backers must do a better job of explaining to the people of Jacona, El Rancho and Hernandez how having the high-voltage line outside their doors is a good thing. Or this will be a bitter fight to the end.