Business

Fresno won’t halt airport project

Council denies labor union’s appeal to stop $16m solar power plan for further environmental review.

By Jeff St. John
The Fresno Bee

The Fresno City Council on Tuesday unanimously rejected a labor union appeal to halt a $16 million solar power project at Fresno Yosemite International Airport for further environmental review.

The appeal brought by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers contended that the 2-megawatt solar project didn’t go through a proper environmental review process, potentially exposing neighbors to dangerous dust and diesel exhaust pollutants.

But representatives of a nonunion contractors group accused the union of using the appeal as a bargaining chip to secure guarantees that union workers would be hired on the project.

The solar project, expected to be the largest airport-based photovoltaic solar system in the country, could save the airport $13 million in energy costs over 25 years.

It will install about 2,300 solar panels on a new covered rental car facility to be built at the airport and an additional 5,400 panels on 39 acres at the southeast corner of McKinley and Clovis avenues.

With the City Council’s rejection of the appeal, the project can move forward.

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“We’re in favor of solar power. But it needs to be done right. Every time a project goes in and earth is moved and equipment goes in, air quality decreases.”

— Gerald Zumwalt, business manager for IBEW Local Union 103 in Fresno, which filed an appeal.
Airport: Union denies pursuing labor deal

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ward without delays, although the attorney representing the union said the mayors are trying to force the city to do the environmental studies the appeal had asked for.

But Kevin Dayton, state government affairs director for the Associated Builders and Contractors of California, said that threat fit a pattern of union objections to other power projects across the state, such as an energy park in the Sacramento suburb of Roseville in 2004.

“We call it greenmail, and they’ve been doing it for years,” he said.

Dayton cited the Roseville project, as one instance in which unions have been successful in obtainting project labor agreements, which can set hiring and wage and hour standards that can favor union workers, at power projects that had objected to environmental grounds.

But Gerald Zumwalt, business manager for IEFW Local Union 109 in Fresno, which filed the appeal, said that environmental issues, not labor agreements, were at the heart of the appeal.

“IFBEW’s position is, we’re in favor of the project, if it’s done properly,” Zumwalt said. “We’re in favor of solar power. But it needs to be done right. Every time a project goes in, and earth is moved and equipment goes in, air quality degrades.”

Thomas Enderow, the attorney representing the union from the Sacramento-based law firm Adams Broadwell Joseph & Carbone, said the airport project didn’t meet guidelines of the California Environmental Quality Act because it hadn’t been subjected to a separate environmental impact report, among other reasons.

But all seven City Council members voted to deny the appeal after hearing City Attorney James Sanchez’s opinion that the project was legal as it exists.

A city staff memo said the project and efforts to lessen any environmental impacts from it comply with the 2010 Fresno General Plan Master Environmental Impact Report.

Sanchez’s opinion was that the city law prevents Fresno from entering into project labor agreements.

Council Member Mike Dage said the council was still in the design stage, no final decisions on contracting and hiring have yet been made, he said.

Slosinaki and Zumwalt agreed that the company and the union would hold meetings on the project.

But union attorney Enderow said talks on labor issues wouldn’t solve the environmental issues at the heart of the denied appeal. He said the union would consider further action in light of Tuesday’s denial, including the possibility of a lawsuit.

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An artist’s rendering shows the $16 million solar power project planned for Fresno Yosemite International Airport.