

Opinion: Eastside can meet energy needs without degrading the community

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Michael Evered

In the April 8 “Observations” column, Puget Sound Business Journal columnist Bob Wallace characterized concerns about Puget Sound Energy’s “Energize Eastside” megaproject as “political silliness by a noisy minority” protecting its views. I’m a member of the Coalition of Eastside Neighborhoods for Sensible Energy, a citizen group supported by residents, businesses and thousands of followers. Views are the least of our concerns, and we’re serious about creating a better, safer solution that meets our electricity needs without degrading our community.

I raised my family and grew my business on the Eastside and believe the energy needs of residents and businesses are aligned. We all want reliable electricity at a reasonable cost. Powering our growth in a way that protects the safety and livability of our neighborhoods enables businesses to recruit and retain employees attracted to our quality of life.

High among our many concerns is the increased risk posed by constructing oversized towers with high voltage transmission lines on top of two large jet fuel pipelines. Pipeline safety expert Dr. Frank Cheng of the University of Calgary wrote that PSE’s plan will significantly increase the risk of catastrophic pipeline fires. Nobody wants a repeat of the 1999 explosion of these same pipelines which killed three children in Bellingham.

Damage to the environment is another significant concern. PSE’s plan commits hundreds of millions of dollars to a solution that does nothing to address the rate of growth in electrical consumption. There are many smart solutions being used by growing cities all over the country to reduce demand. They simultaneously save customers money and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For the past 15 years, Portland has used a network of small generators that run only during peak demand. This is a solution that PSE has not seriously evaluated. We believe such a system could be part of a technology-enabled approach that would reliably meet our growing needs – in lieu of an 18-mile scar through the Eastside.

So why aren’t these higher-tech solutions being embraced by PSE? As Mr. Wallace says, infrastructure is the issue. According to a January 2013 Wall Street Journal article: “Some companies...are pouring money into high-voltage transmission lines — superhighways for electricity — because federal regulators are allowing them to collect above-average returns.” As a regulated monopoly, PSE is, unsurprisingly, determined to collect its 10 percent rate-payer-guaranteed return on the biggest possible infrastructure investment.

Mr. Wallace writes: “Failure to deal with (this infrastructure problem) jeopardizes everyone’s quality of life and our fragile economy.” We agree.

How we deal with it has huge implications for both residents and businesses. CENSE and our industry experts want to work with PSE, the city of Bellevue, and the business community to develop a better solution for the Eastside and future generations.

Industry experts have challenged PSE’s warnings of impending rolling blackouts as ungrounded, based on overestimates of future need. The L.A. Times called similar moves by private utilities in other cities facing the same challenge “scare tactics.”

We have time to do this right. We need to slow the present rush to approve this mega-construction project. This is our opportunity to show what a thoughtful, high-tech, forward-looking community that cares about the environment can do to prepare for our future.

- Michael Evered

Former Bellevue city council member, director of First Sound Bank and former President of the Eastside Mental Health Center