

A Fossil Fuel Company Tried to Put a Dirty Gas Plant on a Beautiful Coastline. It Failed.

California regulators' latest move to reject the short-sighted proposal is a turning point in the state's clean energy future.

By [Jessica A. Knoblauch](#) | March 23, 2018



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Jessica is a former award-winning journalist. She enjoys wild places and dispensing justice, so she considers her job here to be a pretty amazing fit.

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Karina Montoya, whose mother is an agricultural worker, was among the Oxnard, California, teens who spoke out against a proposed gas plant in their hometown.

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This week, the city of Oxnard, California, became known for being more than just one of the strawberry capitals of the world. The coastal town, which lies between the more affluent cities of Santa Barbara and Malibu, recently closed the last chapter of a four-year-long fight to shut down a short-sighted proposal to build a hulking natural gas plant on its wide, sandy beaches. On March 22, California's grid operator gave final approval to a clean energy alternative to the dirty energy plant, pushing the gas project off a cliff.

The victory is sweet for the community, whose predominantly low-income, immigrant residents have some of the worst asthma rates in the country. It's also a signal to the potential for something even sweeter: an end to an era of new gas plants for all communities in the Golden State.

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The fight to shut down a proposed gas-fired power plant project in Oxnard, the largest city along California's iconic Central Coast, all started in the summer of 2014. NRG Energy, a powerful energy corporation, proposed a 262-megawatt gas plant known as Puente that, if built, would join three others marring Oxnard's coast. Instead of sand castles and beach blankets, Oxnard's coastline is littered with these foreboding metal structures, complete with tall smokestacks discharging toxic air pollutants and hollowed out ponds filled with wastewater. Nearby lies a [Superfund site filled with toxic slag](#) leftover from a metals recycling facility.

In addition to the industrialization of its beaches, Oxnard also bears the brunt of the toxic pesticide use that comes with being an agricultural powerhouse. According to the California Department of Public Health, the city has more students attending schools located close to heavy pesticide use than anywhere else in the state.



Lucas Zucker, communications director for CAUSE, helped organize the Oxnard community against the power plant proposal.

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“In a community like Oxnard, you can go up and down the coast, and you're very aware of the differences in your community versus what you see in some of the other communities,” says Lucas Zucker, policy and communications director at the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE). “People see the smokestacks, the pesticides being sprayed in the fields, and they experience the asthma rates, so they're very aware of environmental justice issues.”

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The proposed site of the Puente power plant.

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In 2014, CAUSE members like Zucker began reaching out to the community, including visiting local high schools, to help organize against the power plant proposal. Many of the students who joined the fight came from farmworker families who had seen their parents tolerate multiple injustices over the years in order to put a roof over their heads. They wanted to step up and advocate on behalf of their families.

One of these students was Karina Montoya, an incoming senior at nearby Channel Islands High School. Montoya, whose mom worked in the agricultural fields, got involved in CAUSE to advocate for farmworker rights. But once she heard about the power plant proposal, she began showing up to community meetings and speaking out.

“It’s really unfair [that they are trying to put this power plant in Oxnard],” says Montoya, adding that it hurts to see people pushing for something that’s going to harm the community. “They might not see the hardworking people that are here...all the families. All they care about is the profits they’re making off of the power

plant.”

Another student at Hueneme High, Lilian Bello, got involved after learning that the existing power plants were contributing to the city’s high asthma rates.

“I’ve had asthma for as long as I can remember, and I really didn’t know why,” says Bello, adding that her asthma used to be so bad and frequent that she would often use a special respirator at home. After she learned about the link between bad air quality and asthma, she began attending city council meetings to help put a face on the issue. “We’re here and we’re fighting, but we shouldn’t even have to,” she says.

Together, Montoya and Bello [joined a growing chorus of Oxnard youth](#) speaking out against the gas plant. Over the next two years, many of them showed up at hearing after hearing with powerful and inspiring [testimony](#). They also found creative new ways to express their opposition to the project, including [a rap](#) that played off the lyrics to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* theme song.

The pushback worked, at least temporarily. The Oxnard city council changed its land use plan to prohibit any new coastal power plants. But NRG Energy wouldn’t give up.



Earthjustice attorney Matt Vespa helped shut down the Puente proposal.

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“They were trying to both charm and threaten their way into getting what they wanted,” says Zucker. The company began contributing to local nonprofits and [giving veterans free tickets to the county fair](#), while also threatening to back out of its agreement to clean up two of its existing power plants once they shut down in 2020, leaving the community to deal with the mess.

But once NRG realized the city was dead set against the project, it dug in to wage a legal battle. That’s where clean energy attorney Matt Vespa came in on behalf of the Sierra Club, working in partnership with CAUSE and other environmental groups. The fundamental legal argument against Puente was that locating it on the beach put it directly in the path of inundation by sea level rise.

“The whole point of building the plant was to ensure reliability in the area during extreme weather, but NRG was proposing to put Puente in a location that itself was highly vulnerable to extreme weather,” says Vespa, who now works at Earthjustice. “It didn’t make any sense.”

Groups like CAUSE, meanwhile, argued that building the plant would create an environmental injustice by further burdening a minority community that already hosted more than its [fair share of polluting industries](#).

The groups joined forces with the City of Oxnard and the mayor pro tem, Carmen Ramirez, to fight the plant.

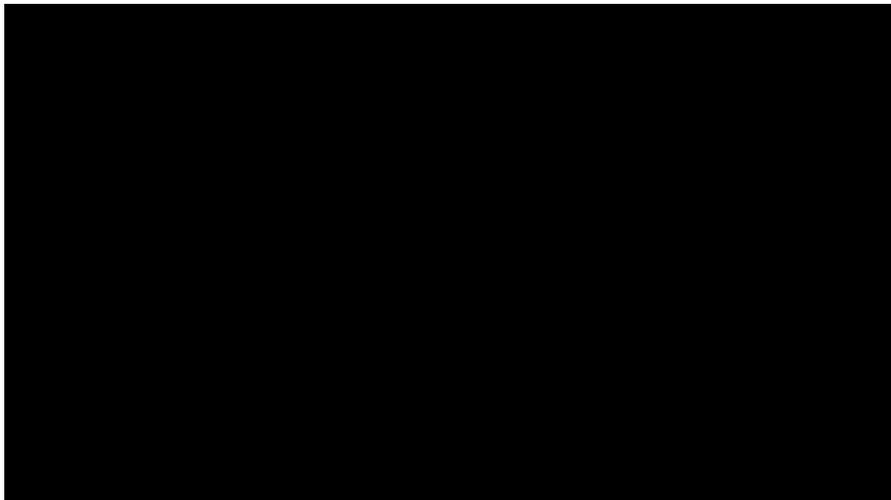
“We’ve sacrificed our beaches for 50 years, and now we want something different,” says Ramirez, a former CAUSE member.

Ultimately, the decision to approve or deny the project came down to two state regulatory agencies: the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and the California Energy Commission (CEC). These commissions are made up of unelected officials generally used to rubberstamping new power plant proposals, a practice that has, in part, contributed to [a glut of natural gas plants in the state](#).

The coalition was up against obstinate regulators and a Fortune 500 company with seemingly unlimited funds, but they pressed on. In addition to the climate change and environmental justice issues raised by the plant proposal, Vespa argued that building dirty backup plants to provide energy during peak times was simply no longer necessary to ensure grid reliability. Advances in clean energy technologies like battery storage had skyrocketed over the past few years. Vespa brought in innovators like Tesla to testify and prove that point in CEC hearings.

Soon NRG’s project, which for years had felt like a done deal, began to crumble. State legislators like State Senator Hannah Beth-Jackson and Assemblymember Laura Friedman highlighted the need to push for clean energy solutions everywhere in California, and especially in communities like Oxnard, where residents are the most in need of breaking the chokehold of fossil

fuels. In a clean energy future, leaders argued there should be *no* sacrifice zones.



In this video from Fusion, residents of Oxnard describe their fight for clean air.

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Despite public opposition to the plant, there were many ups and downs along the way to stopping the Puente proposal. After the PUC ultimately approved the contract for the Puente project, the battle moved to the CEC, which never before had denied a license for a gas plant that the PUC had already approved.

The coalition was fighting an uphill battle, but in June 2017, their hard work finally paid off. The CEC authorized an unprecedented study to determine whether clean energy alternatives could fill Puente's proposed role. The [study's findings did just that](#), signaling the beginning of the end for the project. The CEC then issued another unprecedented statement, this time saying that it would [deny the Puente power plant proposal](#) because of clean energy's ability to fulfill the region's energy needs and the plant's environmental concerns. The proposed denial forced energy planners to go back to the drawing board. Rather than a new gas plant, planners now said they could meet local reliability needs through transmission upgrades and clean energy investments. The grid operator's recent approval of the proposed transmission upgrade signals that the Puente

gas plant will never be built.

“When I started this work six years ago, clean energy was a sprinkle on top of building polluting gas plants,” says Vespa. “Now, you look to the clean energy solutions first. We have finally flipped the model. Puente shows that when you push regulators to take a second look, you come up with better solutions.”

In fact, many are [viewing Puente’s demise as the beginning of the end](#) for dirty power plants in California, and perhaps around the country. Earlier this month, another energy corporation saw the writing on the wall and, seeing mounting opposition, requested to suspend a proposed gas plant 15 minutes away in Santa Paula, a minority, low-income community. Earthjustice is representing the Wishtoyo Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the lifeways of the Chumash peoples, in that fight.

“We have strawberries in Oxnard; they have lemons in Santa Paula,” says Montoya, one of the high school students. “There’s not a huge difference. They don’t deserve power plants just like we don’t deserve power plants. Because we’re humans and we deserve better.”

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