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## Aiken's famed horse country is a magnet for gas plant speculators

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Sue and Chuck Thoreson moved to the Aiken area about 20 years ago from the Midwest, bringing about 18 racehorses with them. Sue said she was horrified to learn that a gas plant was being considered for the area.

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**AIKEN** – The sandy hills east of here are known in global equestrian circles for their spacious horse farms, including the emerald spreads owned by polo-loving billionaires from Russia and Nigeria.

But these gentle hills and plateaus also are targets for land speculators representing a gas-fired power plant developer, fueling fears that the **trillion-dollar rush** to build power-hungry data centers could sweep up Aiken's century-old horse culture.

Property owners near the Montmorenci community east of Aiken said they've received letters, phone calls and visits from people who say they represent LS Power, a company pushing hard to supply data centers with electricity.

The company's plans in Aiken have yet to surface in regulatory circles or public meetings. Gary Bunker, chairman of county council, said the issue was news to him.

Power generation and distribution in the Aiken area involves a mix of utilities, including Aiken Electrical Cooperative, Central Electric Power Cooperative and Santee Cooper. In a joint statement, Central and Santee Cooper said they hadn't authorized LS Power to "take any actions" or "pursue building any generation."

But in **a letter to landowners** on LS Power's letterhead, a representative said the company is hunting for land to build "stand-alone gas-fired power generation." The letter said the company was offering three times the market value. The letter's wording set off alarms given the rush to power new data centers.

Symantha and Allen Melemed own a horse farm in the area and received a letter from Anthony Ripepi, who signed the letter as an "Independent Landman Representing LS Power." Symantha, a cancer researcher and equestrian competitor, called Ripepi for details.



Symantha Melemed, a cancer researcher, also competes in horse dressage and eventing competitions.

TONY BARTELME/STAFF

“We’re kind of in a time crunch. We’re reaching out because we're looking to buy properties,” he can be heard saying on a recording she provided to the newspapers.

He said the company was working with Aiken Electric Cooperative, that a future gas plant could power data centers, and that sites off New Holland Road were early targets because they were near an existing electrical substation.

“It's not like wind or solar or anything like that. It's an actual generating station,” he said, adding later in the conversation that a new gas line would be needed, along with new power lines. He told her that about 10 landowners had expressed interest. “We’re going to sign all of them and then do a final review.”

Ripepi did not return calls and emails requesting comments. Brittany Grace, another representative who contacted residents, did not respond to emailed questions.

Steven Arabia, LS Power spokesman, **confirmed that the company** was in “the very early stages of exploring multiple sites in South Carolina, including in and around Aiken County” for new generation projects. But he said the company hasn’t settled on a site or power generation technology. “We have no agreements with any data centers, utilities or any other potential customers at this time.”

LS Power’s search for land east of Aiken comes amid a fierce rush locally and internationally to build data centers and power plants to run them. Projects in South Carolina, including one by Dominion and Santee Cooper at a retired coal plant near Canadys, **triggered fierce opposition** from conservationists and landowners.

In the Aiken area, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, is building an \$800 million data center in the Sage Mill Industrial Park near Graniteville. A team of about 100 technicians will operate the data center after its expected completion in the spring of 2027. Last year, Aiken County Council greenlighted an Oppidan data center near Graniteville and a DC BLOX data center near North Augusta. Aiken **business and government** leaders see projects like these as pivotal to the area’s economic growth and diversification.

Whether LS Power moves forward in Aiken or not, the letters and contacts with horse farm owners provide a window into the land rush that can precede these often-controversial projects.

In the phone call with Melemed, Ripepi said that once sites are secured, it often takes three years before they decide whether “we are going to use the property or not, because there’s quite a bit of permitting.” He mentioned an agreement a few weeks ago that fell through after another company offered the landowner 15 percent more.



Power lines to a substation off New Holland Road near Aiken, target of land speculators interested in building a new gas plant.

TONY BARTELME/STAFF



Aiken's polo culture stretches back more than a century. Players here battled at Aiken's Whitney Field, one of the nation's oldest.

FILE/BARRY BORNSTEIN/SPECIAL TO THE AIKEN STANDARD

## Aiken's horse culture

No matter the timeline, Melemed and other horse farm owners here were shocked by the news that a power plant was even being considered for their area.

"This is a beautiful and special place," Melemed said from the couple's farm, Rivendell, its name inspired by the fictional sanctuary valley in "The Lord of the Rings." Frodo Baggins and other horses named after Tolkien characters stood behind fences. Melemed pointed to

an old longleaf pine with large cones scattered amid fallen auburn needles. Gusts blew through the branches, and the air filled with a gentle flowing sound. “Imagine the whir of a gas plant all the time,” she said.

Aiken’s unique horse culture stretches back **more than 130 years**. The area’s sandy soil drains quickly and creates excellent footing for horses, which is especially important for polo, steeplechases and other vigorous equestrian events. Because of the sandy surface and moderate climate, downtown Aiken in the late 1800s became a “winter colony” for the Vanderbilts, Whitneys, Astors and Pulitzers, with polo and horse racing shaping the city’s social calendar.

Today, downtown Aiken and land east of it remain a magnet for horse lovers **from around the world**, including Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, who had a large tract until he sold it a few years ago. Sayyu Dantata, a Nigerian petroleum magnate and prominent polo player, owns a farm, as does Andrey Borodin, an exiled Russian banking billionaire whose **polo teams** have won top tournaments. The area also has notable polo exhibition fields, including La Bourgogne Club de Polo and New Bridge.

Downtown Aiken still has a large horse district with stately mansions called “cottages” on sand roads. But over time, many families bought larger tracts east of the city, moving horses back and forth, said **Shelley Onderdonk**, a veterinarian who lives in the area with her husband, **Adam Snow**, one of America’s most accomplished polo players.

Onderdonk and Snow traveled the world during Snow’s polo-playing career, eventually writing **two books** about their journeys. But they settled in the Aiken area because of its spacious pastures and tight-knit horse culture — much different from South Florida and other equestrian hotspots. Horses “are just happier here — you don’t get that everywhere else — and this makes it a magnet for horse people,” she said. Building a power plant or data center amid these pastures would be inconsistent with the area’s history and current uses, she said.

Sue Thoreson, who lives with her husband, Chuck, on a horse farm east of Aiken, said she heard about the gas plant plan after a representative from LS Power drove down their long driveway and knocked on their door.

“He said they were looking for a minimum of 50 acres, and I said we’re not interested,” she said, adding that her immediate feeling was “total aversion. This is a lovely area. I can’t imagine something like this happening here.”



Symantha Melemed and her husband were shocked to hear that speculators were targeting east Aiken for a new power plant.

TONY BARTELME/STAFF

## Next steps

Eddy Moore, decarbonization director for the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, said he was surprised that LS Power representatives mentioned data centers in their landowner pitches. In the past, industries typically said “there is generically a need,” even though data centers were the driving force.

He said a typical gas-fired power plant would first need an initial green light from the S.C. Public Service Commission. No such application has been made, according to the agency’s online database.

Aiken Electric Cooperative buys wholesale electricity from Central Electric Power Cooperative, and a spokesperson referred questions to Central. In their **joint statement**, Central and Santee Cooper said the utilities first identify their power generation needs and then sometimes work with power generators. The utilities said they were in “a very early stage of identifying potential resource options,” but that “to the extent that anyone has claimed to have an agreement with us to build a power plant, that is inaccurate.”

Residents in the area also noted that the area LS Power appears to be targeting is full of land conservation easements, which would create potential legal hurdles for a large industrial development with gas and power lines.

On her Rivendell Farm property, Melemed strode past her horses, their eyes covered with see-through masks to keep the flies off. Gusts blew through the tall longleaf pines that survived Hurricane Helene. “This is the reason horse people have been coming to Aiken for generations.”

But, she added, even if power plant developers decide not to build in Aiken’s horse country, competition for land to power artificial intelligence servers isn’t going away. “If they don’t build here,” she said, “where else will they look?”

*– Aiken Standard reporter Carl Dawson contributed to this article*



A Russian oligarch and avid polo player named Andrey Borodin owns a property just outside of Aiken in an area where power companies are looking to build new gas plants.

FILE/STAFF

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## TONY BARTELME

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