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More than 1,000 sign petition against siting a power plant in Aiken County horse country

BY CARL DAWSON CDAWSON@AIKENSTANDARD.COM

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Pictured from the left are Theresa King and Symantha Melemed on April 13 with a banner protesting the potential siting of a gas-fired power plant in rural Aiken County.

CARL DAWSON/STAFF

AIKEN — Organizers of an online petition opposing the possible siting of a gas-powered electrical generation plant between Montmorenci and New Holland say more than 1,000 people have added their names.

The area is centered on a Santee Cooper electrical substation on New Holland Road, proximity to which is a preference of **LS Power**, which confirmed in March that it was **exploring multiple sites** in and around Aiken County for new electrical generation projects.

“This would be a bad place for it,” said Symantha Melemed, one of the petition’s organizers. “We don't think it's a good idea.”

Independent agents representing the company have contacted Melemed and other residents, seeking tracts of at least 50 acres and offering three-year options with monthly progress payments toward a final sale at prices as high as three times the going rate.

“Everyone with more than 50 acres on Fox Pond Road was asked,” Melemed said.

“We want to get people aware of it,” she said, so she and others formed a community group called **PACE Aiken** and launched the **petition website**, which went live April 11. The group also designed banners and yard signs available at a local print shop.

Theresa King, an organizer who has affixed a protest banner to her fence bordering New Holland Road, said she knows of six property owners who have signed options with LS Power.

Melemed said she’s contacted county council members and state legislators about the potential facility, but “all of the government entities are a little bit hamstrung until there's a formal application.”

If and when an application to build a plant is made to the S.C. Public Service Commission, Melemed plans to present the petition and signatory’s comments to decision makers “in one bolus,” she said, “instead of having people just kind of spam them.”

She said she’s wary that “by the time the community has the opportunity to weigh in, a lot of it's already been negotiated and it's a done deal.”

Melemed pointed to a statement by LS Power that “community fit” is an important factor when pursuing their projects.

“We want to go to LS Power and be clear that this is a poor community fit here in Aiken,” she said.

Melemed said she hopes that communicating to the state public service commission, Aiken County Council, and the county’s legislative delegation that the community doesn’t want a generating plant cited in the watershed of the South Fork Edisto River will lead LS Power to “say no to this area entirely” and go “look somewhere else.”

Industrial areas, not farmland interlaced with conservation easements, would be more appropriate, she said.

“What we want to do is continue in good faith working with Aiken Electric Cooperative, which did not know about [LS Power's optioning land], and keep talking to our government officials,” she said.

“We’re not against growth, and that’s why we’re engaged with the county’s comprehensive plan. We really want to see that passed next week at county council,” Melemed said.

“We’re doing this on behalf of the rural community here,” Melemed said. “It doesn’t matter if you have a horse farm, own a small house or rent a house. The noise and the pollutants and the industry that would be coming here are going to affect everybody.”

“I feel like we need to just keep going on this until we get something on letterhead from LS Power that says ‘We're leaving Aiken,’” King said.

CARL DAWSON

REPORTER

Carl Dawson covers the City of Aiken and the Savannah River Site. An Aiken County resident since 1990, his work has appeared in the Charleston News & Courier, the Tampa Tribune, the Atlanta Constitution and the Augusta Chronicle. He holds a B.A. in English from the University of South Carolina.