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County OKs battery storage in Acton

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L.A. County Supervisor Kathryn Barger speaks as the Santa Clarita Valley Chamber of Commerce Chamber host the 14th annual State of the County Luncheon held at the Hyatt Regency Valencia on Wednesday, 053123. Dan Watson/The Signal

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The LA County Board of Supervisors signed off Tuesday on a 400-megawatt battery energy storage system, or BESS, facility for Acton over the objections of a group of mostly longtime area residents there who sported black "Don't BESS with Acton" shirts at the meeting.

Proponents mentioned how the project will help the state move toward its decarbonization goals, reduce problematic public safety power shut-offs and contribute to the local economy.



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Opponents, including a number of Acton residents and members of its Town Council, have questioned the safety of such projects, the validity of the county’s determination and why the rural community should have to host a disproportionate amount of sites for storing battery energy.



Fifth District Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who represents the Santa Clarita Valley, said she was trying to be “proactive and realistic” in her approach, which included introducing another motion to try and guide the Department of Regional Planning.

This was the second time Barger heard from the residents, who also spoke up in June when they first became aware of the 26-acre project. At that time, Barger authored her first motion, which sought to take a closer look at the concentration of BESS facilities.

There are reports that as many as half-dozen of the projects could be put in the area, with her motion Tuesday discussing both the importance of addressing residents’ concerns as well as some of the challenges that have come up in addressing the state’s grid problems in a transparent manner.

“I want to be clear that there are new laws and policies that grant the state authority to select sites and environmentally clear the development of clean energy solutions — like battery energy storage systems — without local government input,” Barger shared in a statement after the meeting. “Today’s discussion with the county’s Department of Regional Planning satisfied our board’s questions about the Hecate Project’s exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act. The project was ministerially approved by the Department and will continue to move forward because it meets the requirements within existing County Code.”

Part of residents’ concerns included that the project was being considered a power distribution facility and not a transmission facility, which is only subject to a ministerial review. This is the same type of process that someone might go through to seek permission to add a new fence on a property, according to county Deputy Planning Director Dave De Grazia.

The approval process for the BESS was determined by Planning Director Amy Bodek’s call for such facilities, according to county officials. The facilities aren’t actually codified in LA County because it’s such a nascent technology. However Susan Tae, assistant deputy director of planning, said LA officials’ determination is consistent with how other counties have treated the facilities based on their function.



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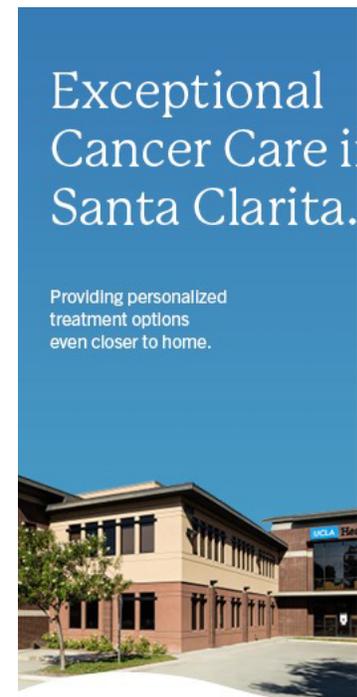
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In addressing residents' concerns, Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said that while the arrays are part of a relatively new field in terms of construction and fire safety, the department reviews all plans based on safety standards developed by LA County and those of the National Fire Protection Association.

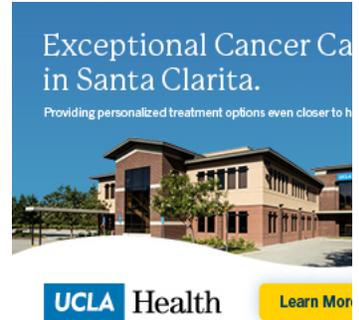
Several Hecate officials also spoke to the project's benefits, which included an annual investment of \$100,000 in the community as well as about 100 jobs that would be there for the construction of the \$2 million project.

"This project will provide power to hundreds of thousands of homes," said Luke Nicholson of Hecate. "We need to decarbonize our grid in order to achieve state climate goals that have been set forward."

Barger said she recognized the importance of these goals, but also wanted to see a process that was more deliberate about where these projects were approved, in part to avoid a "notable concentration" of the applications getting approved for the 5th District.

She noted in her motion that under the current approval system instituted by Bodek, all of the current proposals for BESS are in areas where they would be subject to ministerial review, which is separate from a conditional use permit-approval process that requires a public hearing.

"(My motion) directs our county's Department of Regional Planning to create an ordinance that'll help us prevent an overconcentration of battery energy storage sites in North County – which has the wide availability of land that is needed for these types of projects," Barger wrote in a statement Tuesday. "A county permitting process will help us get to the heart of community concerns about overconcentration and fire safety while also creating a pathway for appropriate siting and permitting this land use countywide."



Perry Smith

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