

Sempra submits plans for new plant

OK for business park in Escondido may take up to year

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ESCONDIDO -- Sempra Energy unveiled plans yesterday for what would be the largest business park ever built in the city, and the first major power plant in North County in more than three decades.

The Escondido Research and Technology Center in Quail Hills, as the project is known, would feature a 550-megawatt, natural-gas fired power plant and a mix of high-tech offices, buildings for light industry and homes on 186 acres in southwest Escondido.

Sempra officials dropped off the 200-page application at City Hall yesterday, launching what is expected to be an eight-to 12-month approval process.

The power plant has been dubbed Palomar Energy, a name that evokes high-technology and clean air, said Joe Rowley, a Sempra vice president and project director.

"The Palomar Observatory is in the city's logo, and you can see Palomar Mountain from the site," Rowley said. "This will be the cleanest project of its type."

The plant would be the second-largest electrical generating facility in North County, after the 951-megawatt Encina plant in Carlsbad, which was built in the 1960s. The Escondido plant, however, would produce significantly less pollution: about 2 parts per million of nitrogen oxide compared with about 125 parts per million from the Encina plant.

Sempra would design the plant to hunker down on an excavated foundation, Rowley said. The tallest part, the exhaust stack, would rise about 110 feet. New trees, earthen berms and a natural hillside would screen the plant from the rest of the park and nearby residents, he said.

To accomplish that, workers will spend about six months doing extensive grading, including blasting and possibly some rock crushing. About 75 percent of all blasting would occur at the plant site, Rowley said.

Sempra has held about 20 meetings with city officials and neighborhood residents to gather input, said Mark Nelson, Sempra's development director. The noise and dust associated with rock crushing were among their chief concerns.

More than a decade ago, city officials designated Quail Hills, a swath of hilly, rocky land east of Country Club Drive and west of the city's Auto Park, for industrial uses. But recession in the early 1990s, and the high cost of putting in streets, utilities and other infrastructure, stymied projects.

The City Council has been adamant about attracting clean industry and the higher-paying jobs it would provide. In October, the council rejected a plan by another developer to rezone half of Quail Hills for homes.

The Sempra project sets aside about 12 percent of the land for roughly 40 single-family homes on half-acre lots. The types of companies envisioned for the business park range from biotech laboratories to computer manufacturers to makers of plastic and rubber products.

The city's goal is to boost quality of life and make the city attractive to high-tech executives who would otherwise be driving south on Interstate 15 every morning, Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler said.

"We want challenging, exciting jobs," Pfeiler said. "Research and technology are where we are in this economy."

Although the council will have final say on the industrial park, the California Energy Commission will rule on the power plant. The county Air Pollution Control District also will have input.

The plant could be on line in three to four years. Other parts of the park are expected to be finished earlier, Rowley said.

In its application, Sempra said the plant potentially would sell power to the state Department of Water Resources under a long-

term contract.

Sempra also said it is willing to negotiate with Escondido on a separate contract for electricity. Any power generated beyond that committed by contracts could be sold on the open market. When prices are higher, the plant would run more often.

The plant could be shut down temporarily or permanently at any time for economic considerations, the application says.

Sempra reserves the right not to build the plant. In that case, light-industrial buildings would be substituted for its part of the project.