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MY VIEW JULIE REHMEYER

Benefits of solar project are huge

By Julie Rehmeyer
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Electricity is getting pricier for New Mexicans, with Public Service Company of New Mexico planning a 20% rate increase by 2026. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump aims to increase the cost of solar — among the cheapest electricity sources — by repealing the solar tax rebates in the Inflation Reduction Act.

But happily, Santa Fe has the opportunity to provide enough cheap, clean solar power for everyone in the entire city through the Rancho Viejo Project. For decades, it would provide that power at a fixed cost, reducing future rate hikes. It would also provide battery storage, helping to fight rising heat-related blackouts and stabilize the grid. It would spread the benefits of solar to everyone, not just the few with rooftop solar.

To my surprise, some Santa Feans are trying to kill the project. They argue battery failure could cause a wildfire, and they’re citing the recent fire at the Moss Landing battery plant in California to stoke alarm.

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I get the fear: My house is a mile from the site of the 2020 Medio Fire, and firefighters used my yard as a base. I was terrified. But as a science journalist, I also know that we are surrounded by risks all the time. We must assess these risks carefully to make reasoned decisions about our lives.

So how likely are the risks, and do they outweigh the benefits? Battery storage systems have a remarkable and quickly improving safety record: Globally, out of tens of thousands of systems, there were only five battery system fires in 2024, and all of those stayed within the facility. Failures decreased by 97% from 2018 to 2023 and are continuing to fall.

Furthermore, Rancho Viejo will implement state-of-the-art safety measures learned from every past battery fire. It will be enormously safer than the out-of-date Moss Landing facility. The batteries at that older facility were stacked next to one another inside an enormous warehouse, allowing fire to spread from one to another.

At Rancho Viejo, they'll be in individual shipping containers spread far apart, and each will be surrounded by a fire-proof gravel pad, preventing spread beyond a single container. Furthermore, a system will be installed to detect overheating of a cell before it ignites. And even in the case of the Moss Landing fire, air monitoring found no risk to public health throughout the incident.

So while it's easy to concoct frightening scenarios, the reality is that the risk is low. Far lower than the risks I, for example, face by living next to a forest dried out by climate change.

And the benefits are huge. On top of stabilizing electricity prices that otherwise are rapidly rising, it will reduce blackouts and create jobs. Globally, we simply can't maintain a livable planet without many, many, many clean energy projects like these, so many that we can't place them only on brownfields or only very far from residences as some would demand.

Furthermore, if Santa Fe rejects this project, it won't just deprive us of green energy — it will stoke misinformation-fueled resistance to renewable energy projects everywhere. Fear spreads, just like wildfire does. Right-wing propagandists have championed the false idea that clean energy is dangerous, and if Santa Fe buys into it, we'll spread that false narrative further.

We're already seeing that with resistance mounting to the Diamond Tail project in Sandoval County. Is Santa Fe really going to be a community the Trump administration can thank for slowing down the clean energy transition?

Set the fear aside to analyze the facts. Let's seize this opportunity, save money and embrace clean energy.

Julie Rehmeyer is a science writer who has been published in The New York Times, Washington Post, Wired, Slate and more. She lives in Santa Fe.