

MY SCARY JOURNEY, AND MAYBE YOURS...

Living near a proposed commercial solar battery project.

BY DAYNA MATLIN

I'm an artist, not an activist. And I'd like to share my journey with you and maybe some information you may not know. This past June I attended a meeting at the Upstart Crows theater space in La Tienda presented by concerned neighbors from Rancho San Marcos. I learned about AES Corporation's proposal for the "Rancho Viejo Solar Project" and that it was not an ordinary "community" sized solar project. Their plans are to build a 700-acre industrial utility-scale facility, to include 239,000 solar panels, and 69 forty-foot battery containers to house over a million lithium-ion battery cells for storage. All of which is to be located about one mile or so west of Eldorado, and my home.

I'm all for solar power and realize, like many of you, that we need to stop generating energy from fossil fuels. But this is no ordinary solar project.

Prior to the meeting my husband and I read about this project in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, which mentioned two fires at similar but much smaller facilities that AES had in Chandler, AZ and one in Surprise, AZ. Both were in industrial zones. And they were not ordinary fires: they are called run-away thermal fires that can't be extinguished with water. *The vast amounts of water put on these fires are just to keep them cool until they burn themselves out, which can take days or even weeks.* Recently there have been two similar chemical fires at battery facilities in New York state. As a result, NY has put a moratorium on building any additional facilities like this to give them time to learn more about the real risks involved with these battery facilities.

At that June meeting, we seemed to be the only ones in the room who knew



Dayna Matlin in front of the exposed gas line adjoining her property.

I was surprised when we spoke to Santa Fe County emergency personnel, and they told us it would take them 20 to 40 minutes just to get on the scene to assess the situation. And they said we don't have enough firefighters, or the equipment needed for these types of large chemical fires.

about the major natural gas line that runs along the western edge of Eldorado, part of which comes above-ground in four places that they call a regulating station and is maintained by the NM Gas Company. We know this because it abuts our property. It was clear to us that if the lithium-ion batteries started a run-away fire, and with the usual easterly winds blowing our way, in just minutes we could have a very serious situation with explosions not only at

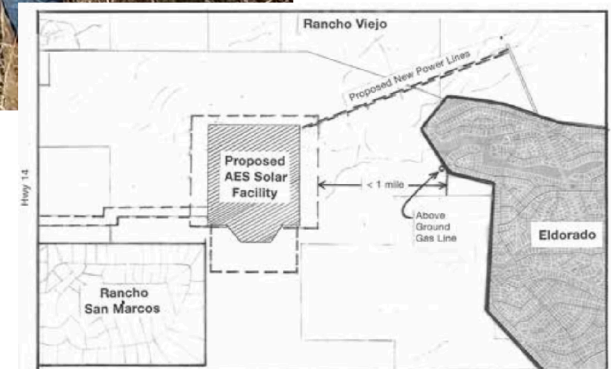
our home but at those of our neighbors who also have natural gas piped in. *This distinct risk of explosions was confirmed by a representative of the Gas Company.* Being a very visual person, the images of the recent devastating fires in Maui quickly came to my mind. *And if that could happen in a tropical environment, wiping out a community of over 13,000 people in hardly an hour's time, causing hundreds of deaths, who's to say it couldn't happen here in the Eldorado*

area where wildfires are already a regular and increasing threat?

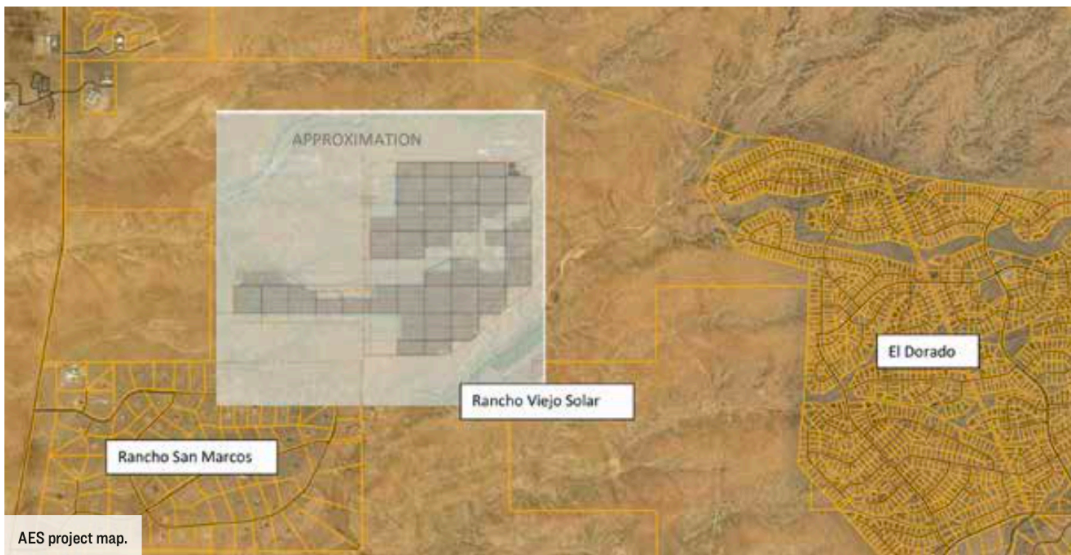
Before I knew what was happening, and despite my being an introvert, I was standing up, raising my hand, and insisting on being heard. And my outgoing husband soon volunteered us to lead the effort to inform all of Eldorado about this serious matter. We knew we'd have help from those who brought this to our attention, with their ongoing and thoroughly exhaustive

efforts, PowerPoint presentation, the NMRResponsible.com website, and a petition to sign at www.nmresponsible.com/general-6, but it still felt like a daunting challenge. *In that moment I realized it would be quite a while before I'd be able to pick up a paintbrush again. Frankly, even writing this is hard for me.*

There was so much to try and understand about all this. Like the increasing heat we are experiencing each summer and the effects it will have on those battery cells and containers. And the increased traffic and dust during construction. And the 140 decibels of constant sound from these battery containers, equal to a rock concert or auto race in a place where sounds can carry for miles. And the fencing and motion-activated security lights. And the impact on our local wildlife, which will be substantial since they also plan to build a 40 to 50' tall, high-voltage power line that will run 2.4 miles to a new PNM Substation just above the northwest corner of Eldorado. AES is requesting somewhere between 32 and 49 million gallons of water for construction, and 650,000 to one million gallons per year to operate, although these extraordinary water requirements don't make sense even to the engineers we've talked to, much less to me, because their fire suppression systems require the so-called, toxic 'forever' chemicals, not water. I'm wondering where all this water will come from. And if there is a



KeepEldoradoSafe map.



toxic fire will those chemicals end up in our groundwater and wells?

We met with other volunteers, formed a steering committee and held neighborhood meetings in July and August. Over 100 neighbors volunteered to distribute “Did You Know...” flyers to over 3,000 homes in and around Eldorado with some of what I’m sharing with you here. So, thanks to those who braved the heat, and to those who are researching, sharing information, and writing letters to our county representatives and the media. I’m impressed and thankful that so many neighbors are getting involved and offering their various skills, services, expertise, and resources. *I wanted to get to know my neighbors better, I just didn’t think it would take something like this. And We’ve Learned More.*

Engineers have confirmed to us that what AES is planning is not a solar project with batteries, *but a battery project with solar.* Let me explain. Their proposed 239,000 solar panels can generate 96 MW of power. The lithium-ion battery cells they are planning can store somewhere between 280 and 345 MW (that’s way over the amount their solar panels can generate). They would only need so much storage if *they planned to buy additional energy off the PNM grid when demand and prices are low and then resell it when demand and the price are higher.* None of which would benefit our community or the state at all. This doesn’t sound to me like they have our community concerns at heart.

If this proposed facility is approved here in Santa Fe County and it should

cause a fire, even with moderately light winds, *it could reach Eldorado in seven minutes.* I was surprised when we spoke to Santa Fe County emergency personnel, and they told us it would take them 20 to 40 minutes just to get on the scene to assess the situation. And they said we don’t have enough firefighters, or the equipment needed for these types of large chemical fires.

Did you know there are no solar facilities currently in New Mexico over 50 MW (with or without batteries) that are located anywhere near residential areas? You can visit www.globalenergymonitor.org and do your own research. Santa Fe County doesn’t have regulations in place for commercial solar projects of this size and complexity. So, why does Santa Fe County seem so set on approving this project that doesn’t seem to fit the zoning and would put so many county residents at risk?

Thinking about all the unoccupied land in our state, it’s hard to imagine why AES couldn’t find a place to site their project that wasn’t in the middle of three residential communities with over 10,000 homes (*Rancho San Marcos: 99, Eldorado: 2750, Rancho Viejo: 7,330 and more in nearby neighborhoods and the 285 Corridor.*)

Some people have accused us of being ‘NIMBYs’, as in “not in my backyard”, or that we must be rich and privileged. But that’s not the case. Like many of our neighbors, our home is our biggest asset, so of course we want

to protect it and its value. I love our peaceful Eldorado neighborhood as I assume most of you do. The fact is, *we don’t think a facility of this size should be in anyone’s backyard.*

Our HOA (ECIA) says this is a political issue, but that can’t be further from the truth. Homeowners here are coming together no matter what their political leanings. This is a safety, economic, health, and quality of life issue. If this project is approved it will affect all our property values, as well as our insurance rates-- *if the insurance companies will still agree to insure us at all.* And what about the businesses here that depend on our patronage? Even if explosions and fires don’t reach all our homes, we will all certainly be affected in one way or another. *Am I the only one having a difficult time sleeping at night as I wrestle with all this?*

As I said, I’m an artist, not an activist. And I believe there is a safe place in our state to site this AES facility and support the development of solar energy. But it simply doesn’t make sense to those of us who’ve studied this project to allow the county to put it here. And it’s clearly going to take all of us to *Keep Eldorado Safe!*

If you’d like to be on our email list and receive updates, you can contact me at: KeepEldoradoSafe2@gmail.com. I try to answer every one, but your patience is appreciated. Because I’m still hoping to steal away and find some time in my art studio soon, to remember why we first moved here.