

Perpetuating coal-generated power shortchanges us all

Scott Gollwitzer

The late Edward Abbey wrote: “At some point we must draw a line across the ground of our home and our being, drive a spear into the land and say to the bulldozers, earthmovers, government and corporations, ‘thus far and no farther.’ If we do not, we shall later feel, instead of pride, the regret of Thoreau ... who wrote near the end of his life, ‘If I repent of anything it is likely to be my good behavior.’”

I quote Abbey because I fear that North Carolinians have silently accepted the fact that Duke Energy will finish constructing a \$2.4 billion coal-fired power plant 50 miles west of Charlotte. Duke will operate this plant (“Cliffside”) for 50 years. Stated differently, those Tar Heel children and grandchildren born today will live with the legacy of Cliffside until they are 50. **Worse, Duke Energy wants ratepayers to foot the bill and is seeking to recover 25 percent — 50 percent of the construction costs before the project is completed.**

The Coaligarchy

I use “coaligarchy” as shorthand for the socially oppressive, environmentally destructive industries, complicit government officials and apathetic shareholders that bring us coal-generated electricity. From cradle to grave, the coaligarchy leaves a wake of human misery and environmental devastation wherever coal is extracted, processed, transported, incinerated and disposed of as air pollution and poisonous post-combustion waste. Cliffside will be no better. Briefly, Cliffside will burn 2.5 million tons of coal each year — much of which will be extracted by decapitating mountains and dumping the tops into nearby valleys and headwater streams. The practice has erased more than 500 peaks from the Appalachian skyline and buried or polluted nearly 2,000 miles of streams. Additionally, by pumping the global warming equivalent of 1 million cars into the air each year, Duke will ravage the North Carolina coastline by increasing sea levels and destroying people’s property. Moreover, Duke will foul our skies by belching out oxides of nitrogen, sulfur dioxide, mercury and other toxic pollutants. Conservative estimates of the externalized costs of damaging our health, forests, water bodies, agricultural crops and fisheries with these air pollutants will add millions of more dollars to the societal price of constructing and operating Cliffside.

In sum, Duke Energy will wreak havoc in the coalfields, ruin our chances to curb global warming and pollute our air, land and water — all while ransacking your pocketbooks to build an unnecessary power plant.

Hope springs eternal

According to a Duke University economist, Duke Energy’s data demonstrates that new power plants can be avoided by modest increases in energy efficiency and deploying renewable sources of energy at levels already required by law. With his electricity sales slumping this past year, it is unconscionable for Duke to request a 13.5 percent rate hike during the worst economic recession since World War II.

To recover construction costs, Duke needs approval from the Utilities Commission. The commission is required to ensure fair regulation of utilities in the public interest and promote least-cost energy planning and conservation. Although the commissioners can deny the rate increase and revoke the construction permit, they’re unlikely to unless they hear from you.

Join thousands of North Carolinians in casting off the tyrannical yoke of silence and telling Duke “thus far, and no farther.” Urge the commission to pave the way to a clean energy future by denying the rate increase and revoking the construction permit during one of six statewide hearings beginning Sept. 9. If you can’t attend a hearing, you may write to the commission.

For more information on the hearings and Cliffside, visit www.stopcliffside.org.

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