

Legislative change streamlines process and grows development

William Roller, Imperial Valley Press, 2-4-11

A new law to allow counties instead of California to approve geothermal projects of more than 50 megawatts may save money and bring jobs to Imperial County.

It is much cheaper and faster to proceed locally than through the state, said Imperial County Supervisor Gary Wyatt.

“It could save developers a year in time and significant savings, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars,” Wyatt said.

The proposal was recently submitted to the California legislative council, Wyatt said. He discussed the issue with the legislation’s sponsor, state Sen. Juan Vargas, who represents Imperial County. The council writes the language of the bill and once Vargas introduces it to the Senate it will be assigned a number and then voted upon, Wyatt said.

Now, larger geothermal projects are permitted through the California Energy Commission. But the initiative by Vargas fits the Board of Supervisors’ legislative intentions of broadening its discretion, Wyatt said.

“I think it’s a great idea,” he said. “Time is critical to the success of any renewable energy project and the county can make any permitting more efficient.”

Simplifying the process encourages more renewable developers to consider Imperial County, Wyatt noted. And the county hopes to reap likely new jobs. Many ancillary services will also benefit including parts, fuel as well as security services, which local business can best accommodate, Wyatt said.

Larry Grogan, senior vice president of Energy Source, a geothermal developer, said there is no other legislative restriction that has inhibited growth as much.

“We always thought between 70 and 100 megawatts was the most-efficient plant,” Grogan said. “Even under the best conditions, expediting a permit through CEC can take two years.”

And depending where a new plant is located, permitting could be completed in three to nine months, Grogan said.

That is because some areas already have master environmental impact reports written. In areas where it is needed, developers can perform mitigation for identified issues or do site assessments.

For the last 30 years Imperial County has had an excellent track record permitting geothermal plants, Grogan said. County assessments include a complete package of water studies, fiscal impact and environmental studies, he said.

Another measure, to allow the county to permit solar projects, is also planned, Wyatt said. Currently the county can only approve projects using photovoltaic technology. But the county would like to permit solar that uses any technology, he added.

“I know one thing, if a project is not built, it won’t benefit anybody.”