

# Riverside ponders burying power lines, but Edison will pause project (CURE)



Riverside City Council Member Steve Hemenway, left, stands Friday, April 15, 2022, with Chris Arellano along the Santa Ana Trail, where a proposed overhead power lines project would be built. Both oppose the project. (File photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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The Riverside City Council voted Tuesday night, May 10, to explore whether it's feasible to put their city's portion of a Riverside-Jurupa Valley power line in the ground to [alleviate concerns about ruining residents' views](#) and sacrificing property values.

With the move, Southern California Edison — which has been preparing for years to build the 10-mile transmission line — will pause the \$521 million project while waiting to see what the city does next, Mark Cloud, Edison's government relations manager for local public affairs, told council members via phone during the meeting.

“We cannot in good conscience continue to incur costs on this project ... because it will ultimately increase costs for our ratepayers,” he said.

Edison, in partnership with the city utility, was preparing to begin construction this summer on a 230-kilovolt line running south through Jurupa Valley and east through Riverside along the Santa Ana River.

The project aims to give Riverside a second connection to California’s power grid. Officials say the city is vulnerable to power outages because it only has one hookup. And in 2007, that connection was knocked out, plunging all of the Inland Empire’s largest city into darkness for hours.

However, [City Council Member Steve Hemenway](#) has repeatedly raised concerns about the impact the project’s high wires will have near homes of some residents in his district. He proposed Tuesday to hire a consultant to study the feasibility of underground wires and deliver a report by November.

Following nearly four hours of discussion and much public comment on the matter, the council voted 6-0, with [Council Member Gaby Plascencia](#) dissenting, to authorize the analysis. Plascencia said she feared the study would hurt the project.

“I think it’s going to cost us more money,” she said. “I think it gives people false hope, honestly.”

Plascencia wanted to know if Edison would halt the project and expressed frustration when told no one from the regional electric company was present. Shortly after that, Cloud was patched in to the meeting.

Upon hearing Cloud’s answer, Hemenway characterized Edison’s position as “unfortunate.”

“It’s a sad gesture,” Hemenway said. “It’s bully ball.”

“This is just a way for them to manipulate the conversation,” he added.

The study could set the stage for filing a petition with the California Public Utilities Commission to modify its decision approving the project.

In March 2020, to provide the second connection, the regulatory body OK’d plans for a 10-mile transmission line, with 4.1 miles of wires in the ground through Jurupa Valley, and 5.9 miles above ground as the line crosses the Santa Ana River, Hidden Valley Wildlife Area and northern Riverside neighborhoods. The commission also approved construction of an electric station near Van Buren Boulevard.

[In an April project update for the](#) council, Ken Spear, major construction senior project manager for Edison, said the the overhead wires would be strung from 38 tubular steel poles ranging in height from 90 to 165 feet and four lattice steel towers 113 to 180 feet tall.

On Tuesday, Riverside Public Utilities General Manager Todd Corbin said putting lines in the ground could boost the cost by approximately \$375 million – an increase of more than 70% – while emphasizing that was a “ballpark figure” and not a precise estimate.

Among other things, the study would examine potential cost increases and extensions of the project timeline. The schedule calls for completion by late 2026.

Hemenway said people near the line in Riverside deserve to have it buried, as in Jurupa Valley.

“How do I say to Riverside residents, ‘Look across the river. It was good enough for those residents, but not you?’” he asked.

In the works for years, the power line is called the Riverside Transmission Reliability Project.

During the meeting, about 20 people asked that the entire length of the line be buried, while two requested the project move forward as is

Justin Scott-Coe, a former city utility board member, wanted the city to stay the course, saying the line would ensure Riverside has “reliable, sustainable and affordable electricity for decades to come.”

Norco resident Randy Lewis said overhead wires would threaten the property values of homes in Norco and Riverside.

“If they have these huge power lines behind them, it’s going to look ugly,” Lewis said.

Other speakers, including Norco resident Amy Johnson, worried that the wires would spark more wildfires in the river bed such as the [Mann fire of March 2020](#). Norco City Council Member Kevin Bash was among those asking Riverside officials to “revisit this.”

Malissa Hathaway McKeith of Riverside, founder and president of Citizens United for Resources and the Environment, suggested that Riverside residents were being asked to put up with overhead wires while [Jurupa Valley](#) and [Chino Hills residents](#) weren’t because “we had a lot of feckless people back in the day who didn’t fight for our city.”

“On the environmental justice issue, what a joke,” McKeith said. “We all know that if these lines were going through a wealthy area they wouldn’t get built, they’d be undergrounded.”