

Position Paper

Dioxin Education Committee

We are a group of local citizens concerned about the fast-developing plan by a local businessman, Oroville City government and out of town big money interests to create several biomass gasification plants in South Oroville, with little or no public awareness, review or oversight.

Following is a summary of some of our concerns:

1) The location:

Their plan is to build at the former “POPI” biomass facility on South 5th Avenue, shut down in 2012 due to dioxin ground contamination. Recently those promoting the project hired an “independent” entity to study the dioxin levels at that site. While the results indicated a safe level of dioxins, some research has indicated there is no such thing as a “safe level.” Also, it’s common knowledge that in these situations those hired are expected to arrive at favorable conclusions for those paying for the study. We believe a truly independent study, paid for neither by proponents or opponents of the project, is indicated.

As articulated by D.A. Mike Ramsey, given the previous demonstrated contamination levels at the POPI site, disturbing the surface at this location would pose obvious danger.

A second facility would be constructed on land overlapping onto the Superfund site of the former Koppers facility. It stands to reason cleanup there would have to be completed prior to any new development.

Given the following cancer statistics, South Oroville is not only a horrible place for what is planned, but also arguably the WORST possible location:

Butte County's overall cancer rates are 14% higher than the rest of the state, including #1 for colorectal cancer, #1 for pancreatic cancer, and #7 for lung cancer (CA State Cancer Profiles 2017-2021).

Perhaps most worrisome: of a total of only nine identified cancer clusters in the state, Butte County, specifically South Oroville, has the only cluster linked to pancreatic cancer.

The only safe conclusion is that environmental factors are the explanation for these statistics.

- 2) DEC believes the proposed locations for the biomass gasification plants represent a clear violation of Environmental Justice Laws, placing an excessive burden on low-income and disadvantaged communities, South Oroville by definition.
- 3) In addition to disposing of large amounts of biomass, the OCDC's secondary stated goal is to provide "clean and inexpensive" energy to the community. There are serious doubts that what they have planned will achieve either.

Despite extensive efforts at rebranding, "Electricity made by burning or gasifying trees is an expensive, dirty relic that relies on industry misinformation and taxpayer money" (Shaye Wolf, Biomass expert, 12/25/25). The Sierra Club agrees.

Information online indicates that the UK backers of BREI make their money from government subsidies.

- 4) Thousands of trucks coming and going 24/7 in and out of Oroville would result in extensive noise and air pollution, as well as likely extensive damage to city and county roads and streets.

- 5) Despite assurances that efforts will be made to contain spillage, potential ground water contamination, especially during flood events, would pose a huge environmental danger given the new facilities would be built upon porous river rock directly connected to the nearby Feather River.

Gasification inherently produces liquid tar. Cleaning this tar from equipment will create large amounts of toxic wastewater.

Hydrology of the area shows an underground branch of the Feather River adjacent to and downstream from Riverbend Park that flows underneath the industrial area.

- 6) The DEC asserts there are viable cleaner, simpler and less expensive ways to dispose of biomass, including, but not limited to:
- Spreading some of the biomass within the forest to decompose.
 - Creating bio char in the field. Although perhaps a slower process, could reduce trucking by 75%, create long-term sustainable employment in rural areas severely impacted by wildfires, and provide carbon capture to benefit depleting soils in the valley (See Joel White, founder owner of Emergence Enterprises). PG&E is currently testing creating biochar in the field, as recently reported on Action News Now.
 - According to Thor Bailey from Applied biomass Technicians, with forty-five years studying the topic, one technology with great potential for recycling wood waste is Wood Aerobic Digestion.
- 7) Burning “ag waste” would also be part of the plan, with no guarantee that material isn’t polluted as well. This could include waste from orchards, walnut shells, perhaps even manure. This waste could contain pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.

- 8) We challenge the “green” narrative of the Oro Verde project. Peer reviewed studies indicate biomass logging can emit more carbon than wildfires, and forest thinning can increase fire intensity by destroying cooling microclimates.
- 9) Carbon Debt: According to the USGS, removing forest residues for energy can result in “carbon debt” that takes decades or centuries to repay, as it removes nutrients from the soil and emits carbon that would otherwise remain sequestered in standing dead wood.
- 10) We are concerned that a vote by a city council that is neither educated nor knowledgeable on this complex topic, having listened to only one side, will forge ahead without adequate input from the public and non-invested experts. Would the council seriously be tempted by a suggestion from developers they would make a bowling alley happen for Oroville?!
- 11) General confusion of who’s behind the proposed project, which has been described in the media as though it’s a done deal. Although we have been paying attention, most of the general public has not; the more we learn, the more confused even we are. Just some of the players: BREI, the Oroville Community Development Coalition, Albion, Heritage Energy, Heffner Enterprises, Oro Verde, and the City of Oroville. Evidently a large portion of the huge amount of capital to pull this off is from out of the country, including the UK and Qatar.
- 12) One of our most immediate concerns is that if “Phase One” (the least controversial phase, solar and battery) is allowed to proceed, the rest will follow.
- 13) How they’re doing it:

*The lead on this project is the so-called “Oroville Community Development Coalition.” From what we can tell, it’s a loose collection of people from the Oroville area, formed by City Council member Shawn Webber and a local businessman. If we’re not mistaken, it’s basically no more than a Facebook group.

*While the OCDC adamantly asserts it is not affiliated with the City, the formats of the two so-called town halls held to this point (August and December) were set and carefully controlled by city staff, including who sits on the panel. Both events were essentially sales pitches, moderated by a city administrator, followed by only a limited time for questions.

14) Unanswered questions are too numerous to list, but include:

*If the solar plant is not going to be connected with PG&E, where will the power be used? (Other micro grids are usually connected to the grid).

*The proposal focuses on reducing energy costs, but biomass power generation is typically 3 to 4 times of wind and solar. How does this follow?

* “Biomass is a money pit that won’t solve California’s energy or wildfire problems” (Shaye Wolf, climate science director at the Center for biological Diversity).

* In the Planning Commission staff report, there’s reference to the solar project and the micro-grid incorporating transmission lines. The need for new transmission projects is typically identified and awarded by the CAISO, followed by a years-long process and a CEQA review. Is the developer looking to build its own lines?

*What’s the financial incentive for the developer if the intention is to build a complex and expensive generation and storage system, then to “gift” it to the City?

- * Is there protection for the City if it's left stranded with unusable assets?
- * Has the developer completed any similar projects in CA or the U.S.?
- * Given the complexity, will the developer have all the right partners lined up before beginning the project?
- * Has the City carefully analyzed the financial risk of owning and operating a municipal utility? (Costs of building, operating, staffing and maintaining?)
- * Though the BREI facility as planned may be well-intended, we believe hurdles to actually making it a reality may be too numerous to overcome, which include: the difficulty of securing debt financing given so many uncertainties, the challenge of different integrating systems components which can create fatal flaws when interdependent on the other, hurdles in obtaining Cal EPA permits and Water & Air quality Boards, challenges integrating with an PG&E, and more.

Pending getting the tough questions answered, followed by a thoughtful review by the public and non-invested experts:

It is the position of the Dioxin Education Committee, that given the complexity, and generational ramifications of this project, that it needs to be brought to an immediate halt.