

\$2b project should not be delayed

A \$2 billion development in Hume comprising a data and communications facility (supported by a 210-megawatt power station) delivering 300-400 full-time jobs might be considered a welcome addition to Canberra's economic landscape – but not by those people who live in the Tuggeranong suburbs of Macarthur and Fadden.

Some houses in this area are about a kilometre (or less) from the proposed site of the gas-fired power station (with its 35m tall exhaust stacks) and data centre to be known as Canberra Technology City, and residents claim they will be subject to unacceptable levels of noise and pollution. Indeed, some argue the proximity of the power station to dwellings could force down real estate values in the area by as much as \$100,000 a house.

While generally supportive of the data centre, the residents want a greater analysis of the pollution issues, and if this reveals unacceptable risks, then they want the development shifted away from its proposed site and closer to Hume, which is zoned for light-industrial developments. They have the support of the ACT Liberal Party, too, with MLA Steve Pratt having said, "if push comes to shove, I will chain myself to a bulldozer to stop this going ahead".

ActewAGL, which will run the power station and oversee its construction, has already conducted an acoustic analysis of the noise likely to reach houses in the two nearby suburbs. It claims noise levels on two of the streets closest to the site, which is adjacent to the Mugga Lane tip, will be no louder than 35 decibels during the day and 7dB at night, and, if needs be, this could be ameliorated with the installation of noise barriers.

An assessment of likely air pollutants from the power station when all generators are running continuously (which is expected to be only 20 per cent of the time) has concluded that the concentration of nitrogen oxide emissions at ground level will be within maximum allowable levels set by the NSW Environment Protection Authority. There will be other environmental impacts, of course, including the construction of a high-pressure natural gas pipeline and overhead high-voltage power lines to the site, the building of the centre itself, and the consumption of about 600 megalitres of water by the steam turbines every year.

Residents are unmoved by the apparently sound environment impact studies, and perhaps their scepticism (and cynicism) is understandable given ActewAGL chief executive officer John Mackay's determination to do

"whatever it takes" to see the power station is built on the Government's preferred site. Those with longer memories will recall ActewAGL has long toyed with the idea of building a gas-fired power in Canberra to boost energy self-sufficiency in the ACT.

The new data centre, with its requirement for secure, uninterrupted electricity supply, is the perfect vehicle to achieve this, and the spare capacity can be sold to the national grid at times of peak load. Not only is gas regarded as the cleanest of all fossil fuels for generating electricity (and the Tuggeranong plant will use the latest technology to ensure the lowest possible nitrogen oxide emissions), the utility has an elegant solution to the question of supply: it will buy its own gas.

There is nothing under the Territory Plan that rules out the Mugga Lane site being chosen for this purpose, and indeed its relative isolation (security being a big consideration of any data centre) was probably as much a factor as its proximity to gas pipelines and transmission lines.

Opponents claim the power station does not comply with ACT noise zoning standards, and that pollution measures only just meet EPA standards. At a weekend public meeting, ActewAGL promised to make public two new air and noise pollution studies, but regardless of what these might reveal, opposition is likely to continue, if only because many people regard it as inappropriate to site a plant this large a size within a kilometre of a residential area.

That the Kingston power house, a dirty coal-fired power station, was tolerated for years by nearby residents without complaint might lead some to conclude that Macarthur and Fadden residents are being a bit precious, or that their situation is unique. In fact, there are at least two other gas-fired power stations, one at Laverton in Victoria and the other at Pelican Point in South Australia, which are relatively close to residential areas.

Growing concerns about carbon dioxide emissions from current coal-fired power stations means many more small gas-fired generators are likely to be built around Australian cities in the decades to come – though probably not as close to houses as the old Kingston power station. The benefits to Canberra of the data centre and power station are undeniable, and though Tuggeranong residents are right to insist their concerns be heard, they, and their backers, should not be allowed to delay the project.