

# Bayview-Hunters Point Residents To City: “No More Power Plants!”

By Joshua Arce

**E**spanola Jackson has lived in San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood since 1948 and seen both the growth and the decline of what has become San Francisco’s most endangered community. An activist and community organizer for over 60 years, Ms. Jackson proudly witnessed the shutting down in 2006 of the Hunters Point Power Plant, which had been a major source of environmental pollution in the low-income southeast section of San Francisco. Just over a year later, however, Ms. Jackson was at the center of a movement to stop four brand new fossil fuel-burning power plants from being set up in her community.

## “We don’t need them in Bayview-Hunters Point”<sup>1</sup>

— *Espanola Jackson, July 2007*

On July 24, 2007 the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) voted 3-1 to enter into negotiations for a \$273 million contract to build four new natural gas-fired power plants to replace Mirant Corporation’s Potrero Power Plant, just a stone’s throw north of the Hunters Point Power Plant.

The California Independent System Operator (Cal-ISO), a quasi-regulatory body charged with maintaining reliability of the state’s electrical grid, had opined that the 362-megawatt gas-burning Potrero Plant could not shut down unless San Francisco built 200 megawatts of new gas power plants to replace it.

Potrero Hill and Bayview-Hunters Point had for decades been locked in a sort of power plant symbiosis, with each neighborhood’s plant dumping pollution on both areas. Now, three of the proposed four power plants were to be nestled between the two communities.

An unexpected nuance at the July 24 power plant debate was SFPUC member Adam Werbach’s lone dissenting vote on the basis of his opinion that the city was swapping “one dirty fossil fuel” power plant for another.

## “A green wave has lifted our expectations”<sup>2</sup>

— *Van Jones, October 2007*

The Potrero Plant operates in anticipation of that rare instance when not one, but two power lines may go out on an extremely hot day. Pursuant to Cal-ISO’s 2004 Action Plan, policymakers understood that some

degree of conventional power plant generation was required to prepare for this contingency.

Ms. Jackson, on the other hand, asserted that one day, “many years ago,” a representative of the Cal-ISO had told her that if San Francisco ever built a new power line into the city, the Potrero Plant could shut down without replacement. When a new power line into San Francisco was indeed proposed, environmental organizations like the Sierra Club and the Green Party, community groups like Greenaction and the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and civil rights advocates Brightline Defense Project soon joined Ms. Jackson in her campaign for “no new power plants.”

As Sierra Club Political Director John Rizzo put it: “...global warming cannot wait, the Bayview and Potrero cannot wait.”

But despite protests from the community and objections from two SFPUC Commissioners, a power plant contract was approved on October 31, 2007.

## “Not convinced the city has done its due diligence”<sup>3</sup>

— *Ross Mirkarimi, May 2008*

In early 2008, Jackson and her growing circle of advocates turned their campaign’s focus on finding San Francisco Supervisors who would vote against the contract. Sophie Maxwell, whose district includes Potrero Hill and Bayview-Hunter’s Point, had come to accept that a power plant-free solution would not be forthcoming.

Supervisors Michela Alioto-Pier, Ross Mirkarimi, Chris Daly, and Tom Ammiano—though not typically

united on policy issues—found common ground on the subject of power plants and their impact on vulnerable communities and the environment.

In April 2008, Alioto-Pier introduced legislation calling for a study of power plant alternatives after San Francisco Planning and Urban Research published a memorandum which laid out a litany of changes that had occurred since the ISO's 2004 Action Plan. Most importantly, in 2007 San Francisco had approved a new underwater power line, the Trans Bay Cable, to bring 400 megawatts of electricity from the East Bay city of Pittsburg, starting in early 2010.

On May 5, Mirkarimi spoke at a City Hall rally alongside Ms. Jackson and over 100 environmentalists and activists. Daly, who also recalled the statement from Cal-ISO about a new power line making the Potrero plant redundant, pledged to forever vote “no” on new power plants.

In the course of a grueling 10-hour hearing that followed the rally, Mirkarimi and Alioto-Pier uncovered that Cal-ISO's 2004 assumptions had not been revisited for nearly four years, that the city had never formally requested that the Trans Bay Cable be factored into the city's power needs, and that the only person in San Francisco procedurally able to put these questions to the Cal-ISO was Mayor Gavin Newsom.

**“I don't want to live to regret this decision.”<sup>4</sup>**

—Gavin Newsom, *May 2008*

Ms. Jackson's firm recollection that a single power line, such as the proposed Trans Bay Cable, would change the whole power plant debate had now been embraced by a wide range of groups. San Francisco policymakers were asked to justify why one of the city's primary environmental justice objectives—the shutting down of the Potrero Power Plant—could only be achieved by building new power plants that would burn fossil fuels for at least 2,000 hours per year for the next 30 years.

At a May 22 meeting with environmental and community activists, Mayor Newsom pledged to request an update to the 2004 Cal-ISO Action Plan—one that would evaluate the impact of the Trans Bay Cable project. On June 2, Cal-ISO Chief Executive Officer Yakout Mansour wrote to Newsom that the Trans Bay Cable did indeed reduce the need for in-city electrical generation from 200 megawatts to 150 megawatts.

Cal-ISO indicated that at a minimum, most of the Potrero Plant could start shutting down upon completion of the Trans Bay Cable in the spring of 2010,

without new power plants having to replace it. Advocates were free to focus on closing the rest of Potrero and increasing the Trans Bay Cable's draw from the Rio Vista Wind Farm and other renewable resources in the East Bay. On July 22, the SFPUC led by Commissioners Richard Sklar, David Hochschild, and Dennis Normandy, voted to rescind and tear up the \$273 million power plant contract it had approved in 2007.

**“If there's anything Cal-ISO responds to, it's community pressure.”<sup>5</sup>**

—Eric Brooks, *September 2009*

The question remained of how to close the 150-megawatt “gap” and some decision-makers were willing to compromise by building fewer power plants or using different locations. Mayor Newsom, however, categorically stated that he would “...veto any legislation to build new power plants.”

One of the chief lessons of the San Francisco power plant experience is that underlying data assumptions should be constantly revisited. Fossil fuel power plants have historically taken the path of least resistance—situating in and around low-income communities of color least able to resist politically. As San Francisco Green Party's Eric Brooks and longtime power plant opponent Marie Harrison have noted, community pressure against Cal-ISO and requests from city officials have kept ISO regulators constantly monitoring San Francisco's power plant needs. By May 2009, Cal-ISO found that San Francisco will actually need just a scant 25 megawatts of generation when the Trans Bay Cable comes online, and in August, City Attorney Dennis Herrera announced an agreement to shut the entire power plant by the end of 2010.

Appropriately enough, at the September 11, 2009 Cal-ISO meeting where the framework for closing the Potrero Plant (beginning spring 2010) was laid out, Director of Regional Transmission Gary DeShazo began his presentation by saying that Espanola Jackson had called him the night before to make sure that he told just the facts when he spoke about the power plant. ■

## Endnotes

1. Jackson, Espanola. Public Testimony before San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, July 24, 2007.
2. Arce, Joshua and Jones, Van. “On San Francisco's Energy Future,” *San Francisco Chronicle* Op-Ed, October 23, 2007.
3. Mirkarimi, Ross. “Peaker Plan Moving Forward,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian* Politics Blog, May 6, 2008.
4. Newsom, Mayor Gavin, “Decision on Potrero power plant delayed,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 13, 2008.
5. Brooks, Eric, September 14, 2009. Interview

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



**Photos:** (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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