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OUR VIEWS

Power grab

Riverside should not give in to thinly disguised blackmail over the city's power plant project. The City Council should reject an agreement that gives organized labor an effective monopoly on construction. Riverside ratepayers, who will fund the plant, should demand a bidding process that uses true competition to provide savings — not surrender to heavy-handed labor tactics.

The City Council is scheduled to consider today a "project labor agreement" for the city's proposed \$110 million power plant expansion. The pact, between the city and labor unions, essentially requires using union workers to build the plant. In return, the labor unions promise to avoid work stoppages or other actions that could delay construction of the plant.

But the language merely puts a polite gloss on a threat: The city has to use union labor or face obstruction to getting the new plant on line. City officials fear that without the agreement, unions could stall progress on the new plant for as much as 18 months beyond the proposed mid-2009 start of operations, leaving the city at risk of electricity shortages.

Riverside did not require union labor on the city's last power project, in 2004. So a union coalition filed environmental challenges that helped postpone the plant's startup by nearly a year. Fighting those complaints added at least \$2.1 million to the project's initial \$75 million cost.

Going along with what is little more than a legal protection racket, however, does not serve ratepayers' best interests. Riverside officials estimated in 2005 that using only union labor on the earlier plant project would have added \$7.6

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million to its cost. And the current labor agreement's proposal for a \$50,000 payment to a trust to support local staffing and job training furthers union goals but adds no value to the Riverside project. The city's goal should be the most cost-effective construction contract possible, regardless of unions' role. Giving organized labor a monopoly inevitably increases the financial burden on city residents and businesses.

Rejecting the labor pact carries risks, however. Riverside's growing demand for power will soon — perhaps by 2010 — exceed the city's capacity to provide it. Without the 14 percent increase in city power supplies the new generators would provide, Riverside faces possible rolling blackouts during periods of high energy use.

But that outcome is not a certainty. The current economic slump has also slowed growth in Riverside's electricity demand, which may give the city some leeway on deadlines. And those who oppose the labor agreement should realize that stance also brings a responsibility to curb energy use, to help buy the city time.

Riverside has no guarantee of power sufficiency, especially during a summer heat wave. But forgoing efficient use of public money is never an acceptable course, even in the cause of energy expediency.