

Making Climate Justice

'Dirty' Deely coal plant retires this year. We must close the rest by 2025.

By Greg Harman

SAN ANTONIO—Lumbering through the Earth Day throngs at Woodlawn Lake in April, the soot-stained “coal monster” pleaded his case.

Here were booths about solar energy, tables with native plants, and eager promoters of meat-free diets. CPS Energy, owner-operator of the City’s two coal plants, was everywhere handing out trinkets and brochures.

But—in spite of the fact that the CPS Energy’s coal burning is responsible for sick families at home and public health crises worldwide thanks to its contribution to climate disruption—no one was talking about coal.

Except the shaggy coal monster.

‘Dirty’ Deely ambled forth to read his press statement:

“To overheat the planet, I belch out 2.7 million tons of carbon dioxide and 74 tons of methane every year.

“To give you the asthma and heart attacks your medical community has come to rely on, my old parts release 4,175 tons of smog-forming nitrogen oxides and 19,844 tons sulfur dioxide each year.

“Then there’s that my dirtiest little secret: 256 kilograms of airborne lead (just a tiny spec can mess with your baby’s brain).

“In other words: I’M DOING MY JOB. I’M A COAL PLANT.”



Some got the joke; others were more dubious. A man with an asthma inhaler ran up for a photo op and asked the man in the hairy, sooty gillie suit to pretend to strangle him.

The creature readily obliged. With 40 years of experience, choking folks is just muscle memory.

The guerrilla education campaign was the work of Climate Action SA, a climate justice coalition made up of dozens of San Antonio community organizations, including Esperanza Peace & Justice Center.

It was intended to place the burning question of coal power at the center of the City’s public climate-action conversation. Since

San Antonio Mayor Nirenberg announced in June 2017 that the the nation’s seventh largest city was at last prepared to tackle its first climate action and adaptation plan, the question of coal has been virtually MIA within the Climate Action & Adaptation Plan (CAAP) process.

Charts from the existing SA Sustainability Plan displayed during the initial round of working meetings with the San Antonio Sustainability Office and frequent CPS Energy contractor Navigant Consulting portrayed the chief carbon offenders as transportation and buildings. It was only the small print at the bottom of one slide that offered a “by the way”: half of the city’s full climate pollution is from CPS Energy.

Bowing to community pressure nearly a decade ago, CPS Energy pledged to close the two-unit Deely by 2018. That promise quickly changed to “in” 2018. Now it looks like the major regional polluter will be burning straight through the heat of summer, the wrath of ozone season, and all the way to the end of December.

Less clear is the fate of the younger two-unit Spruce.

While the coal plants have been throttled back slightly as the utility has begun to burn more natural gas, Deely and Spruce still belch out massive amounts of pollution.

Deely, Spruce, and Brauning, the city’s largest gas plant, huddle together on the shores of Calaveras Lake south of town. All told, the complex belches out nearly 10 million metric tons of CO₂ every year.

Additionally, the complex pumps out 670 tons of methane, 86 times as potent

as CO₂ when it comes to trapping the sun’s heat. On top of that is the 814 tons of nitrous oxide (300 times more powerful than CO₂).

The less-used Deely is to blame for 2.77 million tons of CO₂ annually, as least as of 2016, the most recent year for which data is available.

The money-losing Spruce has replaced Deely as San Antonio’s biggest polluter. It is responsible for 5.54 million tons of greenhouse pollution annually. With increased use, VH Brauning grew from 700,000 metric tons to 1.4 million metric tons of CO₂ between 2010 and 2016.

The plant pollution hurts families at home immediately in a variety of ways. It also throws fuel on the fire of the growing climate crisis, which is already punishing the most vulnerable people the most, those without the resources to resist ever more powerful storms, rising temperatures, and deepening droughts.

With all of this nastiness in motion, it was a strange sight indeed to see CPS CEO Paula Gold-Williams in March pull out a “flexible” vision of future power generation showing an expansion of natural gas and at least one of the coal units still burning in 2042 and possibly beyond.

While CPS Energy’s “Flex Plan” proposal envisions renewable energy additions, those are modest and don’t appear in any seriousness until the 2030s.

As with Deely years back, community groups rallied to decry the continued reliance on Spruce.

“It’s absurd to think that we should have any coal in our energy mix anywhere close to 2042,” Terry Burns, MD, chair of the Alamo Group of the Sierra Club, said at the time. “If CPS is at all serious about addressing climate change and the impact air pollution has on public health, all coal should be phased out over the next decade.”

In the days that followed the problematic release, CPS officials began to suggest that the “plan” isn’t a “plan,” after all. It was merely a conversation starter, as Gold-Williams suggested June 13, 2018, during the opening of the first public forum on the energy vision. After presenting that nebulous picture of the future of power generation, Gold-Williams insisted, in an off-handed way, that, of course, CPS cares about “climate.”

The ambiguous plan had obviously been well sold to the business community. One after another, various chambers of commerce directors sang the praises of nimbleness and flexibility just as they had celebrated CPS’s earlier multi billion-dollar nuclear plant gamble a decade back. (Given that the utility was forced to “write off” more than \$390 million due to that nuclear adventure failure, it’s easy to see how “small and nimble” would look pretty good this round.)

Members of Climate Action SA, who first organized for a justice-driven climate action plan last summer, were more skeptical as were allies and members of the various Climate Action and Adaptation Plan committee and steering members.

Those CAAP volunteers may not have heard much about coal power to date, but one graph shared recently by Navigant appeared to be fresh in their minds. It was a preliminary chart of the city’s climate pollution. It showed that even if the City achieves greenhouse reductions recommended for CPS in the City’s sustainability plan (40 percent renewable power by 2040) there is still another 40



CPS Energy’s four coal plants including Spruce 2 (center smoke stack closest to camera) which was completed on Calaveras Lake on Sept. 15, 2010. Photo by Lisa Krantz, Staff / SA Express-News

percent’s worth of reductions needed to meet our local obligations toward keeping global warming’s rise to under two degrees Celsius.

In other words, CPS’s flexible plan isn’t a plan. It is a dangerous exercise and a waste of time.

That’s why Climate Action SA rolled out their proposal a week earlier at a press conference outside City Hall (to the chagrin of some inside the soon-to-be-rehabbed landmark).

It was, as Public Citizen’s Kaiba White

correctly identified, “the first public discussion about what San Antonio’s greenhouse gas reduction goals should be.”

That discussion was short. As were the deadlines for CPS:

2025: All coal plants are shut down.

2030: All fossil fuel use ceases.

2050: The environment of San Antonio is so improved—its parks, soils, and landscapes revived; it’s technology, construction and transportation practices so transformed—that the City no longer pumps greenhouse gases into the climate system, it absorbs them.

Ultimately, the City becomes “carbon negative.”

Getting to this point will inevitably be extraordinarily challenging. More challenging would be remaining a city at all, if rapid changes are made.

When CPS Energy shifted to heavy reliance on coal power in the 1970s, its leadership didn’t do so in malice. They were seeking to fulfill their mission to provide affordable and reliable power to the city. The energy choice also flooded the skies with dark soot, covered the land with dangerous heavy metals, and has released hundreds of millions of tons heat-trapping gases into the world’s climate system—resulting in a steadily strengthening of hurricanes and heatwaves, droughts and wildfires.

Here and around the planet, those least responsible for climate change are forces to suffer the most.

For the coal monster, it may all be in a day’s work.

For the rest of us, this monster’s early retirement is the only way forward.

Bio: Greg Harman is a journalist, community organizer, and regular La Voz contributor. He works for the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club and is a steering committee member of San Antonio’s Climate Action & Adaptation Plan. For more information about Climate Action SA, see: climateactionsa.com.