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## **PACE never lost momentum**

There were many stories in 2008 that ignited passion for a short time and then fizzled out. But this year's Story of the Year burned bright the entire year in a power struggle between the people of eastern Tulare County and the public utility of Southern California Edison.

It should not come as a surprise that 2008's headlines were dominated by the opposition to SCE's route as 2007 ended with nearly every community east of Visalia thinking they would be cut by the powerline path. In 2007, Edison held several public hearings in Woodlake and Farmersville to gather public input on its proposed route and two alternate routes.

SCE then rekindled the controversy in April by announcing that it would go with a modified version of the original route - despite designing a new route that seemed to effect a handful of property owners instead of the more than 200 on its preferred route because it was cheaper. City officials, farming groups and property owners wasted no time in forming a committee to oppose every route except the new Alternative Route 3, which mostly runs along existing right-of-way through the cattle-ranching foothills north of Woodlake. The committee came to be known as P.A.C.E. (Protecting Agriculture, Communities and the Environment) and helped Proyecto Campesino hold its first informational meeting for Spanish speaking residents near Farmersville on May 24.

On May 30, SCE officially submitted its application to the California Public Utilities Commission, a state regulatory agency that sets electricity rates and issues permits for the construction of new and rebuilt transmission lines and substations. Known as the San Joaquin Cross Valley Loop Transmission, SCE proposed constructing a new, double-circuit 220-kV transmission line that would connect SCE's hydro-electric facilities in the Sierras to its Rector Substation, located southeast of Visalia. The lines would run along 130 steel towers ranging in height from 140-160 feet swathing through prime farmland along Highway 198's scenic corridor. The proposed path also cut through the heart of Farmersville's future industrial complex on the city's north side. Farmersville was the first city to adopt a resolution formally opposing the route in May. Other cities, such as Exeter, Woodlake, Lemon Cove and Visalia also opposed the route.

PACE quickly held a bilingual meeting June 7 at the Spanish Assembly of God and then meeting on June 12 at the Exeter Memorial Building. That same month, PACE began a letter writing campaign asking the CPUC to consider Alternative Route 3. Local historian Mary Gorden submitted a report detailing SCE's failure to consider culturally-sensitive Native American burial and village sites as well as Hogwallow Preserve near Lindcove.

In July, PACE stepped up its efforts to inform the public about SCE's plan by floating two orange weather balloons on Highway 65 to show passing motorists where the lines would cross and how tall they would be. Later that month, the group hired Dr. Lon House, an energy and water consultant, to help them navigate the CPUC public hearing process.

The CPUC held two educational workshops Aug. 11 in Farmersville and Aug. 12 in Woodlake, also reviewing the process. The agency then held two scoping meetings Sept. 17 in Farmersville and Sept. 18 in Woodlake for the public to ask questions and submit comments about the Environmental Impact Report.

In November, PACE began aggressively campaigning for public participation after word that Administrative Law judge Hallie Yacknin would hold a Nov. 19 hearing to listen to public comments one last time before the process began. The group placed signs reading "Last chance to say No to Edison" all along the route.

The visual worked as more than 300 people attended the meeting at the Visalia Convention Center, all but a handful in favor of Alternative Route 3. At the meeting, Yacknin noted that she had received over 600 letters and e-mails prior to the comments at the meeting.

The year ended with the CPUC having more comments on the project than it ever anticipated in a rural area and both SCE and PACE awaiting for round two in struggle that is sure to shape much of 2009.