Omaha Public Power District (OPPD) has an outdated and polluting system of providing power to Omaha-area residents. OPPD’s coal-fired North Omaha plant sits in the heart of the North Omaha community and lacks modern pollution controls. The old plant symbolizes the way utility companies made electricity in centuries past.

OMAHA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT’S LISTENING SESSIONS: WHAT’S AT STAKE?

In the coming weeks and months, OPPD has committed to evaluating its electric system and to take public input into consideration as it plans for the future. OPPD’s decisions will have a huge impact on Omaha residents and businesses for decades to come. Unfortunately, OPPD’s “listening sessions” already demonstrate that OPPD hasn’t been listening. Hundreds of people joined a photo petition asking OPPD for more clean energy and to rely less on coal. Hundreds have attended board meetings, asking for an end to coal use and a transition to more wind, solar, and energy efficiency. Right now, OPPD is only considering keeping coal or adding natural gas, a far cry from the full and robust analysis of future energy options we had all hoped for.

We have a tremendous opportunity to tell OPPD that Omaha’s future is brighter if it closes the door on outdated coal-fired electricity and embraces the chance to add wind, solar, and energy efficiency to an updated and modern electric system. A cleaner Omaha not only brings the new economic development opportunities, it promises a more equitable community that doesn’t ask the residents of North Omaha to bear the burden of the city’s energy needs.

SEIZING OMAHA’S OPPORTUNITY

Less coal and a stronger commitment to clean energy would bring huge benefits to the City of Omaha and its residents and businesses. Some of the most important benefits include:

NEW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN OMAHA

OPPD’s investment in wind has the potential to spur economic development in Nebraskan communities and to bring innovative companies to the state. Last year, Facebook announced plans to build a new data center near Des Moines, Iowa instead of Kearney, Neb., citing Iowa’s options for renewable energy as a deciding factor for the data center location. Just across the state line in Council Bluffs, IA, Google has invested a total of $1.5 billion in a data center that it wanted to plug into wind energy. Rather than watch billions more invested across the river in Iowa, now is the time to seize Nebraska’s top-rate wind potential and to transition OPPD to a truly modern utility that can attract new business.

In addition, a commitment to Nebraska-based wind ensures that more of Omaha residents’ energy dollars stay right in Nebraska, rather than padding the pockets of Wyoming coal companies that sell coal to OPPD. In a report titled Burning Nebraska, already ranked fourth in the nation in coal imports per capita, spending $203 each year for every man, woman and child on imported coal. A recent study titled “Impact of Wind Energy on Property Taxes in Nebraska” by Bluestem Energy Solutions and Baird Holm Law Offices outlines how each megawatt of wind development provides $6,000 in revenue to the county where it is constructed.

It’s simple: a continued reliance on coal sends money out of Nebraska and detracts new businesses while an investment in clean energy keeps money here in Nebraska.
HIGH-VALUE SERVICE THAT PROTECTS AGAINST RISKY FOSSIL FUELS

OPPD has a responsibility to provide affordable, reliable, and environmentally sensitive power to the people of Omaha. Outdated, risky coal-fired power plants are contrary to OPPD’s mission.

In a report titled Practicing Risk-Aware Electricity Regulation: “What Every State Regulator Needs to Know,” utility expert Ron Binz details why coal and nuclear are the riskiest types of electric generation, and that energy efficiency, wind, and solar are the least risky. Things like environmental costs, safety risks, and the rising cost of hauling coal in-state make coal and nuclear bad bets.

Ron Binz’s warnings have already proven true in Omaha when the Fort Calhoun nuclear plant flooded, and then remained offline for years when serious safety concerns were revealed. The cost to get the plant back online is estimated at around $1 billion, and despite announcing that the plant re-started, it came back offline again on March 17th when the automatic shutoff system was triggered. OPPD’s rate increases over the past 10 years point back to coal and nuclear. For example, OPPD increased rates when it added a new coal unit at its Nebraska City plant. Contrast that to OPPD’s recent announcement that its decision to add 400 megawatts of wind power without causing any rate increases for customers.

To bring OPPD’s coal plants up to the standards of modern plants they would need air and water pollution controls that they currently lack. These controls can cost hundreds of millions of dollars each, and could quickly add up to billions of dollars. This is before OPPD even considers the need to reduce carbon pollution. It’s important that Omaha residents and customers don’t allow OPPD to make the same costly mistakes again by choosing to rely on coal for decades to come.

A HEALTHIER AND MORE EQUITABLE OMAHA

OPPD’s oldest coal-fired power plant is the North Omaha plant, which has been burning coal since the 1950s. The plant is one of Douglas County’s largest sources of pollution and it sits in the heart of the North Omaha community where nearby residents are exposed to high concentrations of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury. The impacts of these pollutants are well-known.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and leading respiratory health experts from American Lung Association and Respiratory Health Association, exposure can trigger asthma attacks and cause respiratory problems that exacerbate lung disease and aggravate heart conditions. According to the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health, if pregnant women are exposed to mercury, it can lead to serious birth defects, including impairments in language, attention and memory.

According to the NAACP report, “Coal Blooded: Putting Profits Before People” the North Omaha coal plant as one of the twenty worst violators of environmental justice, and gave the plant a letter grade of “F.” In Omaha, the Douglas County Health Department reported that 18 percent of African Americans in Omaha have asthma, far exceeding the citywide average of 8.9 percent.

Coal plants are notorious polluters. OPPD should consider options to replace North Omaha with solar, wind, and energy efficiency, and OPPD’s future energy choices should not perpetuate a model that puts our dirtiest sources of energy in the poorest neighborhoods. For example, OPPD should invest in low-income energy efficiency programs to reduce energy usage and overall energy demand. This year, OPPD included $0 in its budget for low-income energy efficiency, providing yet another example of OPPD’s energy inequities and a critical opportunity to voice our support for change.

ENDNOTES
1 Union of Concerned Scientists: Burning Coal Burning Cash
2 A copy of the report can be found at powerlincolnlocally.com