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LODI - It's going to power Lodi homes and businesses, BART trains, and even that crazy Internet technology that no one quite understands yet but is very cool anyway: the Cloud.

Dignitaries and officials from 13 agencies that make up the Northern California Power Agency gathered Friday to dedicate the Lodi Energy Center, a 300-megawatt natural gas power plant that is the first of its kind to use a "fast-start" that can ramp as much as 200 megawatts in 30 minutes. Most power plants take a minimum of 90 minutes.

"It's a first, and it's going to be a model for many others," Lodi City Manager Rad Bartlam said. "It is good. It's exciting."

The \$500 million project - \$388 million for construction and \$112 million in debt service - was touted Friday for being the cleanest energy source in California and an economic stimulus project that created 300 construction jobs and will continue to employ a staff and maintenance crew.

The 100-foot-tall plant utilizes a natural gas turbine and then converts the wasted steam from the process to produce clean, efficient energy. The plant goes online in about six weeks and will deliver power to 13 agencies. Lodi will use 9.5 percent of the plant's power, about 28.12-megawatts, through its Electric Utility to serve homes and business customers.

One third of the plant's power will be used by the California Department of Water Resources to pump water "for millions of Californians," Healdsburg Mayor Gary Plass said.

Other major users include the Modesto Irrigation District and Silicon Valley Power in Santa Clara, where technology companies need to power the computer servers that store information and make up the Cloud. The Cloud is where companies such as Amazon and Apple create customer-accessible accounts and store electronic purchases such as mp3 music files and e-books.

Friday's dedication included hearty thank yous to many in the crowd of 200 who came together to work on the long-planned project and its two-year construction cycle.

Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, D-Lodi, was impressed that the plant was "built on time and on budget."

Three video messages from Gov. Jerry Brown, Rep. Jerry McNerney and Sen. Barbara Boxer also highlighted the positives of the power plant.

"It's a big winner," Brown said in his message. "It's new (technology). It's jobs, and it's reliability."

The project was not without its controversies. Some questioned whether construction workers were hired locally as contract guidelines required. A labor group that represents nonunion construction companies also was outspoken in criticizing a project labor agreement the NCPA entered into with union affiliates, which included a \$90,000 payment from the power agency to a union group fund.

Officials on Friday denied those assertions, saying the Lodi Energy Center employed 80 percent of its construction workers locally and hired soldiers who returned from war.

"These union agreements would cut bid competition, raise costs, and prevent ratepayers from getting the best quality construction at the best price," said Kevin Dayton, a former representative of the NCPA foe, Associated Builders and Contractors.

Dayton and his colleagues made little to no impact on the construction of the project, however. And, those who were key figures in building the plant maintain that the NCPA and the state are

better off for it.

"I know and feel good that this plant will be serving the power needs of Lodi and all the participants for decades," said Lodi Councilman Larry Hansen, who also serves on the NCPA board. "I'm really grateful this plant was built in Lodi."