



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published May 12th, 2010

Tree Trouble on Mulholland Ridge

By Sophie Braccini

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) surprised some Moraga residents when it started cutting mature native oaks on Mulholland Ridge without a permit. Moraga municipal code states, in section 12.12.030, "A person who desires to cut down, destroy or remove a native tree, orchard tree or trees or a tree of historic significance, located either on public or private property, shall file an application with the planning director..." Residents reported the activity to the Town; the cutting has stopped and the agency has begun the process of getting a permit.

PG&E spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian explained that the agency must follow new Federal standards, which emphasize a 'zero tolerance' for tree-caused outages on transmission lines. According to the agency, the trees on Mulholland Ridge run beneath a critical 230kV transmission line that feeds Moraga and Orinda. Because of the high voltage, greater clearance is needed between vegetation and transmission lines than what is required between vegetation and distribution lines. "We met early on with the Town of Moraga to discuss the need and scope of this important work," said Sarkissian, "We received written authorization, in advance, to conduct and begin this reliability and safety work. We were subsequently notified that the Town believes permits will also be needed to conduct the work. We always work with city and town partners in a manner that is environmentally focused, and we have put a stay on the project as we work with the Town to resolve this issue."

Moraga Public Works Director Jill Mercurio recalls a slightly different series of events. "The owner (the Town) agreed that PG&E has the right to come into their easement and maintain their facilities. However, the owner (the Town) also told PG&E that it would be required to get a tree removal permit from the Town (as the local jurisdictional authority)," said Mercurio, "Had PG&E indicated that they were having their contractor come within a few weeks, we would have worked with them more to get the process started, but we were told that they would be doing the work in two months, so we did not walk them to Planning to get them started. Had PG&E said they would be starting in two weeks, we (the owner) would have also had other conditions that would have restricted the work since it was the rainy season."

Some cases of Sudden Oak Death have been spotted on the Ridge, and precautions may need to be taken to avoid the spread of this disease. "According to PG&E's arborist the trees should be chipped on site and left there," said Mercurio, "the Town will determine the best practice when the permit is issued."

Planning Director Lori Salamack confirmed that she met with PG&E representatives on May 5th and that the agency would apply for a permit. She added that the Town could impose mitigation to the tree cutting in its response to the permit request, but that she needed to see the application before making that determination.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA