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A Miner Transformation in Orinda?

City and PG&E consider undergrounding utility lines and making major thoroughfare safer

By Laurie Snyder

The Orinda City Council dusted off a pair of old Public Works plans on Sept. 3 which could potentially transfigure a major portion of Miner Road.

The first, which would involve the undergrounding by PG&E of overhead utility lines along Miner from Camino Pablo to Lombardy Lane, last saw significant action by the City Council nearly 10 years ago when it adopted Resolution 59-04, following a public hearing, to create a Rule 20-A underground district. Although the city worked with PG&E staff to plan the project, progress stalled when PG&E ended up deferring it due to a lack of funding. According to the staff report, PG&E finally re-approached city leaders earlier this year because PG&E is now "attempting to clear the backlog of these types of undergrounding projects." (For Rule 20-A information, visit: www.pge.com/myhome/customerservice/energystatus/streetconstruction/rule20/.)

In addition to hearing a presentation by PG&E about the company's latest plans for the undergrounding, council members also began revisiting the possible creation of a pedestrian trail along the same section of Miner Road. Creation of a trail had first been considered by city leaders in the late 1990s, and then again in 2004 and 2009. As described in the staff report, "The plan at the time was to coordinate the trail project and the PG&E project in an effort to share the available space within the road right of way to create a joint location just off the existing edge of pavement for the trail and buried utility lines." Theoretically, the proposed trail would have made it safer for cars, pedestrians and bicyclists to co-exist, but the initiative was removed from the city's Capital Improvement Plan after the City Council decided in 2009 against a feasibility study.

"Tonight is merely intended to be informational," emphasized Mayor Amy Worth as she explained that current council members were just at the beginning of their look at all that had come before. A formal public hearing will be scheduled at a later date.

At this juncture, PG&E hopes to relocate the utility lines within Miner's existing roadway pavement "except when connecting with vaults and splice boxes to be placed just off the existing edge of pavement. PG&E believes this design is necessary due to lack of right of way and physical flat space off the existing edge of pavement." In prior discussions, PG&E had planned to place those same lines in a joint trench off the pavement edge, enabling the city to place a new pedestrian trail on top. City staff believes this redesign may now make it easier for the city to build the trail because PG&E would be grading areas around the splice boxes and vaults and removing existing utility poles. Seven residents spoke during the public forum; several encouraged council members to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety on Miner Road. One described the status quo as "an accident waiting to happen." Others asked whether it might not be prudent, after PG&E's long delay, for the City Council to consider other sites which might now be more important candidates for undergrounding.

Councilmember Dean Orr led council's questioning of PG&E asking, among other things, if the undergrounding meant that telephone and other utilities would also be included. PG&E representatives affirmed that this would be the case due to Rule 20-A.

Chuck Swanson, Orinda's director of public works, suggested that PGE might wish to conduct a public workshop over and above the City Council's formal public hearing. Council members continued to stress that the dialogue has just begun. "Stay tuned," said Worth.

To learn more, read the staff report and listen to the meeting audio, both of which are available on the city's website.

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