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PG&E Prunes Plans for Undergrounding

By Laurie Snyder

New faces turned out for the July 2 Orinda City Council meeting at which residents and elected officials mulled Miner Road's potential utility undergrounding. Interest in the issue spiked after council members directed staff and Pacific Gas & Electric representatives to find a way to get the project back on track following the unexpected notice from PG&E in April that it "could not proceed due to escalated construction costs."

According to the staff report, the city has \$2.2 million available in Rule 20A credits to help fund the cost of undergrounding "and can borrow up to five years of future allocations estimated at \$350,000 for a total of \$2.55 million." In addition, "PG&E has been coordinating with Contra Costa County to secure a loan of \$150,000 (up to a maximum of \$500,000) of their Rule 20A credits to supplement this project."

So the latest plan would scythe \$1.7 million from the \$4.7 million tab originally projected by allowing PG&E to reduce the area to be undergrounded - from Camino Pablo to Camino Sobrante rather than Lombardy Lane - and to cut traffic control expenses. Instead of keeping one lane open with flaggers, each segment of Miner Road where the undergrounding is occurring would be closed to all traffic (except school buses and residents living within the construction area) from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays at the time that segment is under construction. During the project's estimated eight to 10 month completion, five segments of Miner Road are projected to be impacted at different times.

"The first order of business was to really take a look at this project and see how we could build the project for the community with the funds that were available," said PG&E's project manager, Linda Swartz. "We did come up with some engineering changes, and also worked in partnership with the city on some restoration and traffic issues." In addition to eliminating a segment of Miner Road from the plan, PG&E would cut out the related mainline trenching there as well, "which means that those utility poles would remain." Additionally, 11 service recipients would not receive the underground service as originally planned.

"In working with the city, we do have some options on closing the road - doing the construction in sections to minimize the impact to residents as much as we can." PG&E also changed the mainline trenching requirements to restore the street while using less paving. "We did look really long and hard at this project and we think that the revised scope is the most feasible scope - and the scope that's going to give you the most poles removed with the money that you have."

Council members noted that they had received a number of calls and emails from residents concerned about the initiative. Eight residents also expressed their opposition, in person, to aspects of the project ranging from the potential removal of trees and other vegetation by PG&E to the potential danger posed to drivers and walkers by rerouting the 6,000 trips made daily by drivers from Miner Road onto Camino Sobrante.

The undergrounding item was agendized for discussion purposes only. No action was taken. As of press time, council members planned to conduct another public discussion of the matter Aug. 5. (See the May 7 article, "From On to Off Track," in our online archive at www.lamorindaweekly.com for a review of how PG&E and the city reached this point.)

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