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Residents petition to save trees in Lafayette

By Pippa Fisher

The tree debate in Lafayette is branching out as residents are adding their support to a fast-growing petition demanding the protection of the 272 Lafayette trees currently slated for removal by PG&E under their Community Pipeline Safety Initiative.

The CPSI is PG&E's initiative designed to improve the safety and reliability of natural gas transmission systems across Northern and Central California, following the deadly San Bruno explosion in 2010 when a 30-inch diameter pipeline failed. The initiative helps to ensure the pipeline is operating safely by looking at the area above and around the pipes to be certain that first responders and emergency response crews have critical access to the pipelines in the event of an emergency or natural disaster.

In March, after two years of back and forth and after the total number of trees to be removed was reduced from 1,000 to 272, the city council gave PG&E the go-ahead to remove those trees identified as potentially blocking access for maintenance and first responders.

PG&E spokesperson Jeff Smith said that over the past two years the utility has met with and partnered with local first responders to identify which trees need to be removed to provide emergency access. The company's initial assessment of 1,000 trees came from its aerial GPS search. However a subsequent walking tour resulted in fewer trees being identified.

Smith says they are contacting homeowners currently and aim to come to an agreement on how to meet their needs. He stressed there would be no work on any trees until an agreement is reached with the individual homeowner.

"We recognize how important trees are to the Lafayette community and the environment, and are working with the city, East Bay Regional Parks District, EBMUD and local residents to plant new trees to help preserve the local canopy," Smith said. "The important public safety concern is ensuring that first responders like firefighters have necessary access to our gas transmission lines in the event of an emergency or natural disaster."

The petition, started by Lafayette resident Michael Dawson, gathered more than 500 signatures in three days. It requests that PG&E release a map showing locations of trees in question, that they publicly tag the trees to be removed and that the city should notify residents that they are under no legal obligation to sign removal agreements with PG&E per California state law.

They dispute PG&E's claim that some trees need to be removed to allow access, particularly along the Lafayette-Moraga Trail, where they say access is not an issue and therefore additionally they want the city of Lafayette, PG&E and the EBRPD to come up with a plan to shield the pipeline along the trail or, ideally, move the pipeline five feet further into the trail, eliminating the need for tree removal.

He makes the point that there have been no cases of gas explosions caused by tree roots in California but rather instead by bad PG&E welding. In fact he points to evidence that trees could even decrease pipeline failure by supporting soil structure.

Dawson addressed his concerns to the city council at their meeting on April 24. Lafayette resident Rob Sturm also spoke, echoing the sentiment. Both respectfully acknowledged the council's efforts to bring the total number of trees in jeopardy down, but said these efforts fall short of their mission to preserve Lafayette's semirural feel. Mayor Mike Anderson agreed to invite PG&E to come back and discuss the tree removal further.

"The city council approved the request by PG&E to remove 272 of the more than 1,000 trees originally proposed for removal, due to the insistence by the utility that this significant change in the ambience and character of the city was necessary to assure the proper access for the maintenance of the gas transmission line," Anderson said.

He continued, "As the purveyor of gas service for our community, the city regards PG&E as the expert in the operation of this critical infrastructure and therefore defers to their position that there are no less damaging way to provide this access."

He noted that the city has asked that PG&E make a publicly noticed presentation on the project and explain the need and rationale for this large tree removal project. "A date for this has not been confirmed, but is expected to occur in May," Anderson said.

Dawson commented, "I've contacted the city managers in the neighboring towns, and Lafayette is the hardest hit. PG&E will take down only one tree in Danville. Walnut Creek had 734 originally planned for removal, and is now reduced to six public trees and only two private trees more than 10-inches in diameter."

Dawson, who has set up a website at savelafayettetrees.org, reflected, "This issue seems to have touched a nerve in people. Everyone loves our city's trees," he said.

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