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Controversy surrounds trees slated to be axed

By Pippa Fisher

A growing number of vocal residents are pushing back against the PG&E proposal that would remove 272 trees in Lafayette.

Frustrated by the lack of communication from the utility company, a large number of concerned residents aired their opinions at a recent city council meeting, which in turn prompted PG&E to host a series of pop-up discussion opportunities at the Lafayette Reservoir and along the Lafayette-Moraga trail.

In March the city council gave the go-ahead to PG&E to remove the trees as part of the utility's Community Pipeline Safety Initiative put in place following the 2010 San Bruno pipeline failure and consequent disaster. According to the CPSI, the trees need to be removed to provide access for first responders in case of emergency. They also claimed in a letter agreement with the city that "...tree roots may cause damage to pipes by exposing them to corrosion."

Although the item was not on the agenda for the May 8 city council meeting, about 20 speakers took advantage of the open comments to let the city know their feelings.

They addressed concerns ranging from loss of the semirural feel of Lafayette to loss of wildlife and habitat for birds, especially during nesting season, to loss of soil stability to concerns over the lack of dialog with PG&E.

Several residents questioned whether money wouldn't be better spent improving the safety features such as gas leak detection and shut-off valves.

The council heard from a first responder who works with PG&E on calls who made the point that the pipeline along the trail is already fully accessible in his opinion. He also argued for replacing the aging pipes before a big earthquake hits, moving the pipe over a few feet away from houses.

Also at the meeting was PG&E Director Angus Coyle, who reassured residents that there would be no rush to action. He said he wanted to continue the dialog and that clearly there was outreach work to be done with the public. However, he made the point that PG&E is ultimately responsible for safety and that it can't compromise on that.

Mayor Mike Anderson said that there was clearly a need for all residents to have easy access to talk to PG&E before the utility comes back to a future city council meeting.

Following the meeting, Lafayette resident Michael Dawson, who started the organization Save Lafayette Trees with a petition which now has close to 2,000 signatures, commented that he thought the meeting went well because it was the first time people were able to give input.

He said the variety of concerns were clearly expressed, ranging from lack of safety valves to lack of public disclosure, and evaluation of the California Environmental Quality Act, were too numerous to ignore. "It was particularly heartening to hear that the city council, and mayor in particular, are now questioning PG&E's rush to agreement," he said. "We hope this opens the door to questioning the validity of the agreement and ultimately recalling it."

If nothing else the strong emotions expressed by residents at the meeting prompted PG&E to more dialog and to initiate the series of conversation opportunities at the reservoir and along the trail, where they were handing out informational brochures and were answering general questions.

When asked about possible alternative solutions, PG&E spokesperson Jeff Smith said, "We look forward to discussing the concerns the community has raised. We are responsible for ensuring the public is safe, and first responders have the access they need, and we can't compromise on public safety. The outcome of those discussions is still to be determined." He added that currently the exact timing has not been set. He said, "The earliest would be mid-June but that is not at all definitive."

Lafayette resident Gina Dawson, who stresses that while the representatives she has spoken to at PG&E have been very polite and helpful, says that she questions the delay of potentially only a couple of weeks in starting.

"It signals to me that PG&E did not take into consideration comments expressed at Monday's council meeting regarding the impact of removing trees in June due to prime nesting season, among other environmental concerns. It makes me wonder if (the) community outreach work Angus Coyle referred to is really about getting agreements from residents who have trees targeted to be removed in place by mid-June. My opinion on that? Just say no."

It is not going out on a limb to say that Lafayette will be hearing more about the trees.

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