



Published May 31st, 2017

Orinda City Council refuses to consider joining a Community Choice Energy program

By Sora O'Doherty

Members of the Orinda community are surprised by and confused that the city council has not taken up the issue of Community Choice Energy in the city.

Eight speakers spoke up in the public forum on May 16 and asked the city council to put joining Marin Clean Energy on its agenda. Council Member Inga Miller's motion to do that was met with dead silence from the rest of the council. Without a second of the motion, the issue was dropped.

When a member of the public raises an issue in the public forum, the council is limited in the actions it can take, but, the council may also direct staff to report back or place a matter on a future agenda for discussion. It didn't.

Miller said she didn't know why her request was not seconded. No other council members would comment on the issue.

Last year the council declined to fund a study regarding MCE, noting, among other things, that no Orinda residents attended the meeting to support the funding of the study. Since that time, MCE made a presentation at the joint meeting of the Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette councils on March 1. Lafayette joined MCE in 2016, and recently Moraga and Contra Costa County joined as well. Community Choice Energy programs have been growing in popularity, and also this month San Jose became the largest city to launch a community choice energy program, of which there are now eight in the state.

Sarah Butler, a former board member of Orinda Union School District, led off the public forum discussion of Community Choice Energy. She informed the council that the Board of Supervisors had decided to join MCE and that MCE had been thoroughly vetted by the supervisors. She noted that there is a June 30 deadline, that all necessary documents are available on the MCE website and distributed Moraga's draft resolution documents to the council.

Many others spoke in favor of joining MCE. Carol Weed, a Walnut Creek resident, said that she has been a customer of MCE for almost a year. She noted that MCE provides better reimbursement than PG&E for energy generated by solar, and even offers monetary compensation. Melissa Yu, a community organizer for the Sierra Club, asked the council to place the matter on the agenda for the next meeting in order to empower residents and businesses to have a voice in where their electricity comes from, and touted MCE for promoting a healthy environment and a prosperous future.

Kelly Cannon, a 12-year Orinda resident, wants the option of using MCE. The program has lots of benefits and very little downside, she said. It saves money and uses renewable energy, she added. Lori Patel, an 18-year Orinda resident, who volunteers in the library, asked for choice in energy. Tandra Ericson supports joining a CCE, saying that the easiest one is MCE. She said, "Climate is very important to me; the only way I can get renewable energy is if you guys give us the option."

The Rev. Michelle Robbins moved to Orinda last July to be the Pastor at St. Marks. Prior to moving to Orinda, she lived in Walnut Creek, where she had the choice of choosing MCE. "We are only stewards of the earth, not the owners," she said. "We need to do a better job of taking care of it."

Despite the pleas of these residents, the council seemed unmoved, with the exception of Miller.

Looking back at the reasons given last year for not continuing to fund the study of CCEs might offer some clues to explain the council's inaction. At that time, the council decided that they preferred to keep the city's focus - and funds - directed toward the goal of dealing with the city's roads. No one, the council reasoned, was clamoring for an alternative source of renewable energy in Orinda. In fact, no member of the public spoke either for or against the proposal at that time.

Council Member Dean Orr stated he had a lot of reservation with the implementation of a program and, based on the information before the council, he could not support moving forward. Then-Vice Mayor Eve Phillips indicated she had similar concerns to Orr's. She stated she has not heard much from residents about the issue and she wanted to be a good steward of the city's finances. Council Member Amy Worth noted that energy costs were low and the CCE looks attractive but she was concerned how in the long run the smaller entities would compete with PG&E and what the eventual impact would be to ratepayers. Based on her experience in serving on joint powers authorities, she noted the tremendous amount of city staff time that is needed, citing the Solid Waste Authority rate-setting process, and she did not anticipate that the CCE process would be any easier.

Then-Mayor Victoria Smith agreed, noting she had concerns with the program's opt-out provisions and some of the longterm liabilities a JPA could face, and she highlighted that PG&E will be facing a mandate to source 50 percent of its energy from renewable resources. Given the city's financial challenges Smith said she would prefer waiting to see how the issues played out with the county and with Lafayette and she preferred that the city focus on its road challenges and goals at that time.

Now the council knows how the county and Lafayette feel about joining MCE, but there is still no action planned on its part.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

