



Published May 30th, 2018

Fire chief supports pipeline access, mum on Lafayette tree removal

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District chief is all in favor of clear access to natural gas pipelines in Lafayette, but he stopped short of endorsing the PG&E tree-removal program in the city.

PG&E held an open house May 9 at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center to explain its plan to remove hundreds of trees that lie atop natural gas pipelines in the city. The tree removal is part of the utility's \$500 million Community Pipeline Safety Initiative aimed at clearing trees, brush and structures so that first responders can quickly access gas transmission lines during an emergency or a natural disaster.

A company placard displayed at the open house included a comment from ConFire Chief Jeff Carman. "In order to respond effectively to pipeline emergencies we need to be able to access them. PG&E's Community Pipeline Safety Initiative assures that emergency responders will always be able to get to the emergency when needed," Carman was quoted on the placard.

Gina Dawson of community organization Save Lafayette Trees, who calls the tree-removal project "unregulated, discreditable and discretionary," questioned whether the utility had misstated Carman's position by implying that he supported the tree removal. "The picture includes a quote that may or may not be correct in representation of your statements to PG&E, but nevertheless, it was prominently displayed at this PG&E community outreach event," Dawson wrote in a letter to the chief.

Carman confirmed that his words on the placard were correct, but he cautioned Dawson not to confuse his statement with an endorsement of PG&E's tree-removal program. "I simply support the initiative to provide first responders access to pipelines. The way PG&E is implementing their program is outside of my expertise," the chief replied to Dawson.

The chief elaborated on his position in a message to Lafayette residents. "I recognize the hazards posed by underground pipelines regardless of who the pipeline operator is. Pipeline ruptures usually occur suddenly with very little, if any, advanced notice so any initiative that ensures access to those pipelines I am supportive of. That being said, if PG&E or any operator is doing something wrong, illegal or immoral under the guise of 'pipeline access' I would not be in favor of that," Carman said.

The timing of the Lafayette tree-removal program is under review, according to PG&E spokesman Jeff Smith.

Burks calls for PG&E-city council summit

Frustration with the responses from PG&E spurred Vice Mayor Cam Burks to call for a public hearing with the utility, together with representatives of the California Public Utilities Commission, to take place at a Lafayette City Council meeting. Burks said he wants direct answers to simple questions: How safe is the pipeline infrastructure in the city right now, and what is PG&E doing to mitigate the risks?

"Over the past year, our engagement with PG&E has been overwhelmingly lacking in clarity, consistency and professionalism," Burks said. "I expect a lot more from our public utility." He cited unclear answers the utility has provided in response to the safety of the city pipelines, the St. Mary's Road closure and general questions from the public, including details of the tree-removal program.

Council Member Mike Anderson offered to work with the vice mayor to put together the format for the public hearing. "We need facts and we need answers," Burks said. "We need to feel that our town is as safe as it can be."

"There have been many opportunities for the public to ask questions and for PG&E to respond, though there may be a difference of opinion on the answers," company spokesman Jeff Smith said. "We are looking into the implication of this city council discussion and what impact it may have on the timing of our Lafayette tree-removal program."

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA