

Lamorinda officials come down hard on PG&E over power shutoffs



PG&E lineman works on the lines on Monday, Oct. 28, just before the restoration of power in Moraga



Photos Sora O'Doherty

During the shutdowns, people were able to recharge their devices and socialize at the Orinda Community Center.

By Nick Marnell

From Erin Brockovich to San Bruno to the Butte Fire, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company has paid out hundreds of millions of dollars in settlement costs for damage claims. PG&E's latest attempt at mitigating a potential disaster – the Public Safety Power Shutoff program – failed to impress Lamorinda public officials, who called for penalties ranging from customer restitution to dissolution of the company.

With a forecast of extreme weather, such as strong winds, low humidity and high temperatures – elements exacerbating a major fire risk – PG&E began instituting mass power shutoffs “for public safety,” as the company states on its website. The utility used customer provided contact information, as well as mainstream and social media outlets, to warn of imminent power shutoffs, which occurred twice in Lamorinda during October.

“The way it went down, people had no idea what was going on,” said Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, Orinda resident and 16th District assemblywoman. Likewise, Orinda Mayor Inga Miller noted that, “A resident told me that when they checked the PG&E website, their property was not scheduled for a power shutoff. But, their power was shut off.”

“There was a lot of confusion. I hope PG&E will come and meet with people affected who received notifications, and learn from their experiences,” said Lafayette Mayor Mike Anderson, with a similar sentiment shared by Moraga Mayor Roger Wykle. Lafayette's Cam Burks – speaking as an individual council member and not for the city – spoke more harshly. “I'm appalled and outraged at the lack of planning and execution of PG&E's power shutoff program; their ‘safety program’ actually started a major fire in Lafayette, resulting in tragic destruction,” Burks said (see story on Page A1).

A crashed company website prior to and during the

shutoffs and the sweeping, unclear and sometimes contradictory notifications frustrated local residents and officials. State Sen. Steve Glazer, also an Orinda resident, called out the utility for its failure to more specifically target the locations of the blackouts, praising San Diego Gas and Electric for doing a better job in that regard. “Additional weather stations and electrical devices improve our ability to divide an electric circuit into smaller sections. We can be more precise when shutting off power so the number of customers impacted by a power shutoff is smaller,” the San Diego utility states on its website.

With Lamorinda residents faced with the realization that power shutoffs could become routine affairs, officials pointed fingers at the outdated PG&E electrical infrastructure as a main cause for the blackouts. Glazer and Bauer-Kahan said that the utility's inability to harden its aged equipment has made its infrastructure more vulnerable to the extreme weather events. “PG&E's decades of neglect in maintaining their electrical infrastructure – and the CPUC's negligent breakdown to regulate properly – has led to profound levels of hardship for our residents and businesses. (PG&E) must be compelled to pay significant restitution,” Burks added.

What can Lamorinda officials do to fix the problems with the company?

“There could be a big change in the utility. All options are on the table,” Glazer said. “They have not acted responsibly.” The senator posited that the state may look to create a utility model that focuses on safety and public protection. Burks agreed, and said that PG&E “needs to be dissolved by the governor and legislature, and taken over by a responsible body that will focus on providing our community with safe, reliable energy.”

Bauer-Kahan said she will back Assembly Bill 378, which would amend the Public Utilities Code to allow cost recovery for customers of a power

shutoff and penalize a utility for every hour a shutoff is in place. The assemblywoman said she also plans to introduce legislation in the coming weeks that will hold PG&E accountable and give localities more control of their own safety. “I think PG&E has failed us for years. Their performance is not acceptable,” Bauer-Kahan said.

PG&E acknowledged that turning off the power presented a hardship for its customers and communities, but was necessary to protect the customers and communities. “Proactively turning off power for safety is just one component of our comprehensive, service area-wide Community Wildfire Safety Program,” company spokesman Matt Nauman said. “As part of this program, we are enhancing our real-time monitoring and intelligence capabilities, putting in place new and enhanced safety measures and further strengthening and upgrading our electric system, with a focus on the highest fire-threat areas.”

Thousands of lights adorn historic tree

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But the tree's survival looked doubtful for a while. In 1976 Diablo Foods burned to the ground. The tree was badly damaged.

“My father loved that tree,” says Diablo Foods co-owner Connie Collier, referring to her father, Ed Stokes, who founded the store. Collier says her father nurtured the tree following the fire. With constant attention from an arborist, Stokes saw the tree back to full health.

The tree, which sits in front of the store, is watered deeply via holes drilled into the parking lot.

“We've been putting lights on it for the past 30 years,” says Collier, explaining that they leave the lights strung all year round. “We used to take the them off every few years when the lights were heavier, but with improvements in technology they weigh less now and can stay.”

The lights come on at Halloween and stay on each night from 5:30 p.m. until the new year. Collier says the exception to that was last year when they kept the lights on through January until they had held her father's Celebration of Life.

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