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PG&E no-show at Lafayette city council meeting

By Pippa Fisher



Workers seen creating a gateway from the PG&E property onto Olympic Boulevard Nov. 5. Photo Pippa Fisher

Despite multiple urgings from council members and city staff to engage with and hear the public, Pacific Gas and Electric Company declined an invitation from the mayor to attend the Nov. 12 council meeting to explain its plans for a major project to upgrade a gas regulator station at the intersection of Reliez Station Road and Olympic Boulevard in Lafayette.

Mayor Mike Anderson had invited PG&E to attend and make a presentation on the proposed project to answer concerns from neighbors who only found out about the work last month when work trucks started showing up on their street following the utility's purchase of a house next to PG&E's existing site.

The location at Andreasen Drive has been used as a regulator station to reduce the pressure of natural gas from a larger transmission line to feed into smaller lines of the distribution system to reach homes and businesses for nearly 60 years.

Residents have concerns ranging from the aesthetics of the project, given PG&E's proposal to remove the line of redwood trees and concerns over what might replace them, to the safety of such a facility on a heavily traveled corridor where crashes have happened, to demands for an emergency egress to be created at the east end of Andreasen Drive since it is currently a dead-end.

PG&E Spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian explained in emailed comments that they purchased the adjacent property, details of which were not made public due to a non-disclosure agreement, to facilitate the upgrade of the station.

"The purpose of this project is to improve safety for the community by removing the old regulator station, building a new regulator station and installing automated valves. PG&E will be installing a receiver for an inline inspection testing tool (also known as a pig) which will allow easier and less invasive testing of the condition and integrity of the pipeline that runs through the station," Sarkissian said. "We also will be installing automated valves at the location which will enable PG&E to turn off the flow of gas remotely."

In a letter dated Oct. 30 to PG&E and the city of Lafayette, Gas Safety Task Force Members Michael and Gina Dawson ask why this particular site was chosen. "Why has PG&E ruled out an automated valve location in a more central location to three transmission lines that may expedite gas release containment to expanded areas of the city?"

Preliminary work, including vegetation removal, demolition of the existing house and grading began the week of Nov. 4 with removal of four trees on the east end. Construction work on the station is expected to start in early 2020 and is projected to conclude in the third quarter of the year.

Council Member Cam Burks asked Planning Director Greg Wolff when the city first asked the utility to reach out to residents. "Last year," replied Wolff. When Burks then asked when the utility actually reached out to residents, Wolff replied "Last week."

Burks has been heavily critical of PG&E. In an email dated Oct. 25 Burks urged PG&E, "Please, try to start being good neighbors and respect what a true relationship could accomplish for all parties. Just go out and engage neighbors and tell them what you are doing."

Council Member Steven Bliss noted that of all the meetings not to come to, "It's incredible to me that they're not here tonight."

When asked why they did not attend the meeting, Sarkissian referred to talks they have had with city staff and the two meetings they have had recently with the neighbors. "Since January of 2018, PG&E has been meeting closely with the city of Lafayette regarding the Reliez Station safety and reliability project. Additionally, we have had multiple meetings with the local community and HOA, including earlier this month. We also shared an updated fact sheet with the city of Lafayette earlier this month. There was no new information to share at this point."

Andreasen Drive Homeowners Association president Aron Rosenberg explained to the council that they have given a list of "non-negotiable" requests to PG&E concerning a second emergency egress, construction of a

wall matching that of the neighboring Olympic Oaks development, a study into vehicular safety of the intersection and said that in exchange for the utility holding off on tree removal other than the four that have already been removed, the association will hold off litigation. "We have not yet filed any legal action against PG&E," said Rosenberg. "Although we reserve the right to do so." He said that the utility had promised to get back to them within two weeks.

Saying that it showed negligence for PG&E to not come to the meeting, Burks said he wants to document all concerns and that a letter should be sent to the utility and to the California Public Utilities Commission. "If there's one community they could endear themselves to it would be this one," he said.

"It was their opportunity and they missed it," agreed Anderson.

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[back](#)

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