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Lafayette switches back to live audio public comments following residents' complaints

By Pippa Fisher

The city of Lafayette is going back to using a virtual platform for meetings that allows remote live audio public comment, using a webinar format with safeguards in place to prevent "Zoom-bombing," starting June 8. It is in response to an outcry from residents who found the previous system of emailing comments to be less than fair. Residents complained their comments were sometimes missed, not always read clearly and that it favored anyone from anywhere making a comment without having to sit through the meeting or even leave a name/address.

In particular many objected to the two hours of public comments read at the almost-seven hour May 18

planning commission hearing of the Terraces application. During that time residents complained no one was reached for questions on their comments.

Lafayette resident Paul Melmed Ph.D. says that outside pro-development groups infiltrated city virtual meetings and some are not even being asked to identify themselves. "This is even more dangerous than being Zoom-bombed," he says. "At live city meetings speakers are always asked to tell who they are and where they live."

Melmed, who has over 50 years experience specializing in speech and language development and learning, points out that human communication involves an instantaneous decoding of complex and intricate cues that are simultaneously delivered and understood with gestures, facial and body ex-

pressions as well as with rapid words, pitch and tone changes. "Online meetings still restrict this essential interpretive experience," he says.

"The last planning commission meeting, May 18th, was online and lasted nearly seven-hours. No interaction with the public was encouraged. No effort was given to have a resident's face appear on the monitor," says Melmed, calling for further discussion of one of the largest housing developments in Lafayette history to be postponed until after the pandemic.

At the May 26 city council meeting Lafayette Vice Mayor Susan Candell described the amount of emails she has received from people unhappy with the old format as "not getting deluged, but getting avalanched."

Lafayette Communica-

tions Analyst Jeff Heyman gave a brief recap in his staff presentation of the background, noting the problems the city had in its first meeting as cities across the state pivoted to virtual platforms made necessary by the shelter-in-place. In that first meeting, open to the public for full participation, Zoom "bombers" twice interrupted with crude and graphic content. To prevent a repeat, subsequent Zoom meetings were restricted to the participants but broadcast live, with the public encouraged to email their comments to be read out by staff.

Recognizing the city has some big meetings coming up, especially the planning commission's June 15 meeting regarding the Terraces, Mayor Mike Anderson stressed the need to get a better system in place quickly.

The council voted unani-

mously to allow live comment, at first settling on using a remote operator to host via a contract with PrimeGov or a similar vendor. However following the meeting, upon further examination the format seemed more complicated and, said Heyman, "was not a good fit for the city." Instead the city will be using Zoom with staff running the meeting and screening participants prior to comment. Video will not be allowed.

"The city listened to residents' frustration and is taking action to remedy the situation by allowing live comment," said Heyman after the meeting.

Full details of how to participate in public meetings can be found on the city website www.lovelafayette.org and links can be found on the agenda prior to the meeting in question.

Nearly 80 trees slated for removal on St. Mary's Road: council powerless to intervene

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Trees are assessed for safety under a tree assessment tool, which evaluates several factors to determine the overall health of the tree and possible danger.

Following the May 26 city council meeting the city put out statements on social media and through its weekly newsletter noting that, "Even if exempted from the ordinance, PG&E must comply with GO 95 when conducting tree trimming for electric facilities." These rules require a 4 foot separation with a recommendation for 12 feet at

the time of trimming for most electric facilities in high fire risk areas.

The utility held a community workshop virtual presentation May 28. Three members of the team answered questions on all three projects, but once again most of the questions concerned the tree cutting, with emailed-in comments asking why tree information was denied to the city, and posing questions about the qualifications of the contractors who worked on the tree assessment. PG&E Senior Vegetation Program Manager Matt McLane, who is an arborist, replied that their

contractors are mostly certified, and that he also looked at all the trees and agreed with the assessments.

The answer didn't satisfy Save Lafayette Trees/Gas Safety Task Force Member Michael Dawson. "It appears they used contractors-in-training and realize the tree information would be used against them. It's clear PG&E can't stand behind the information that determines the removal of 141 trees," he said, referring also to further tree removal that is planned under the EVM program on Moraga Road. "So unfortunately some healthy iconic

oak trees will be unnecessarily cut down due to PG&E's sloppy implementation."

Dawson says that since each tree lies outside of the CPUC mandated 4-foot clearance, PG&E must receive permission from the landowners before removing. "I urge every homeowner to meet with PG&E to review the rationale for tree removal," says Dawson. "Outside of the 4-foot clearance, property owners have a right to request PG&E leave their trees alone or ask for trees limbs to be pruned instead."

Dawson is concerned that PG&E hasn't received permis-

sion from each landowner since the property lines along St. Mary's Road are unmarked and ambiguous as to who owns which tree.

PG&E Spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian notes, "The safety of our customers and the communities we serve is our most important responsibility."

"We don't dispute dangerous trees should be removed, but PG&E seems to be under-investing in system hardening, and haphazardly cutting too many trees without working with the city," said Dawson.



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