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## PG&E reports on PSPS plans - council and community remain skeptical

By Pippa Fisher



A downed power pole obstructs Camino Diablo in Lafayette on Oct. 27. Photo Lamo archives

In its presentation to city leaders Pacific Gas and Electric Co. sought to highlight several ways in which the utility says it is improving over its performance last year, specifically with regard to public safety power shutoff procedures implemented to keep the public safe when weather conditions put the area at risk for wild fires.

However as the testy exchanges following the presentation demonstrated, not everyone was reassured.

PG&E Diablo Division Senior Manager Vic Baker took the council through a series of slides explaining the company's goal this year to reduce the number of customers impacted by PSPS events compared with 2019 by one-third. Baker explained the installation of sectionalizing devices will enable them to cut power to smaller, more specific areas rather than large swathes of residences.

The utility should be able to restore power to customers twice as fast following a PSPS, said Baker. Unlike last year, PG&E will now be able to use infrared equipment to inspect power lines at night and has added more field crews to speed the necessary inspection of all lines before re-energizing.

And in the area of communication, which was acknowledged to be severely lacking last year with PG&E's website crashing and no information available to the public, Baker said the company has grown its IT infrastructure and will be improving customer alerts both before and after a PSPS event, along with bolstering its website.

Predominantly on the minds of the council members was the fire that broke out in Lafayette during a PSPS last October, in a section of the city that had not been de-energized. Prompted by a question from Vice Mayor Susan Candell on whether there had been an investigation on the cause of the fire, PG&E Public Affairs Representative Tom Guarino said he would find out the status of any investigation and get a report back to council.

Lafayette Homeowners Council President Bill Bucher had sent a letter to council members stating LHC's serious concern regarding PG&E's activities "and in some cases lack of activities in Lafayette."

The LHC concerns include the exposed 50-year-old pipeline in Briones, which remains in need of in-line inspection and weld-testing. The letter also addressed the "major safety concern" of the manually operated shut-off valves situated roughly one mile into Briones past locked gates, and several miles from downtown Lafayette - something the Gas Safety Task Force has repeatedly directed attention to.

And the LHC also questioned the lack of report on October's fire. "No report after ten months?" the letter asks.

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Assistant Chief William Pigeon noted its own review done right after the incident showed it was caused by downed power lines.

"I don't feel any more assured after hearing what PG&E had to say because we heard the same assurances last year," said Michael Dawson of the GSTF addressing the council to make comment. He said he would like to have more local information such as about the downed power pole.

"If PG&E knew within 24 hours that this was something they caused, to now stumble and bumble and say maybe we have a cause, maybe we don't, just seems disingenuous," said Dawson, adding he was glad they would be getting a report.

Dawson also said he'd been told by residents along St. Mary's Road where PG&E is engaging in vegetation management tree cutting, that a PG&E employee had threatened the homeowner who refused to allow the tree cutting on their property, saying if they didn't allow the utility to take down the tree the homeowner would have to pay the full cost of removal themselves if needed at a later date, which Dawson said was false.

Guarino took great exception to that, saying that he sincerely doubted any PG&E employee had done that,

but that he would want to hear about it if it had taken place.

The discussion became more inflammatory as both Candell and Council Member Cam Burks defended Dawson. "You're calling him a liar," said Candell.

"Our town almost burned down because of you," said Burks. "There is zero trust between Lafayette and PG&E," he said, adding, "We are getting close to a real critical time and last year the example you set was an F."

Mayor Mike Anderson ended the discussion, noting that the audits will be helpful and that they want to move in the right direction but he also warned, "Let's not diminish the concerns of the public."

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