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Council tackles backup generator noise concerns, amends ordinance

By Pippa Fisher



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Lafayette leaders are set to pass an amendment to the city's noise ordinance, which will exempt generators during power outages in the daytime hours, and for those with medical requirements at night too.

The vote was unanimous at the Feb. 8 city council meeting, minus Cam Burks who was not present.

Lafayette Planning and Building Director Greg Wolff explained that since the second half of 2020 the city saw a marked increase in applications for whole-house backup generators as people sought to safeguard energy sources during Pacific Gas and Electric Company's preventative public safety power shutoff events that have become expected during fire season throughout the Bay Area. However this increase in applications for backup generators coincided with a significant uptick in noise complaints, prompting the city's decision to look at the issue.

According to the staff report, internal combustion engines are fueled by natural gas supplied through a plumbed pipe to power backup generators. When a power outage occurs, an automatic cutoff switch is triggered which disconnects the building from the grid, the engine starts, and power is supplied by the generator until power is restored to the grid. Such generators also require "exercising" of the engine on a weekly basis to keep it in good running order.

Wolff explained in his staff report that sound mitigation equipment such as Zombie Boxes, concrete block walls, and fences with acoustical panels inside installed around generators have proved effective, but the council heard from members of the public that such measures are expensive, and they urged the council to vote for an option exempting generators.

Lafayette resident Jim Benford said that by making the permitting process slow and expensive the city is encouraging people to use portable generators, which are, he said, ubiquitously louder.

In his public comment Lafayette resident Keith Trimble noted that portable generators are more of a problem, often not hooked up safely and said that a proper, inspected generator is preferable, drawing attention to a fire in Oakland last year that was the result of an overloaded portable generator.

The council, while keeping in mind the need for residents to be able to enjoy their homes in peace, and to be able to open their windows at night especially if they don't have air conditioning, saw no need to raise the city's permitted noise level, opting instead to allow for an exemption during power outages from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. and allowing continued use for those requiring power for medical needs round the clock during power outages. Generators would also be exempt during routine, minimally-required "exercising."

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