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Orinda lawmaker pushes for stronger communication between utilities and fire agencies

By Nick Marnell

Prompted by ordinances enacted in her legislative district, Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan on Feb. 10 introduced Assembly Bill 529, which requires that local fire agencies be alerted to any fire safety, prevention, or mitigation services conducted by electric utilities in high fire-risk areas.

Bauer-Kahan partnered with State Sen. Steve Glazer, both Orinda residents, and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District to author her bill that built on ordinances passed in 2020 by the fire districts.

The ordinances required an electric utility to inform the fire districts before the company engages in work during periods of high fire danger, and requires the utility to notify the districts in advance of that work. The Pacific Gas and Electric Company sued both fire districts over the ordinances, citing an overreach of authority. A judge dismissed the PG&E suit against San Ramon Fire on procedural issues, and the company settled out of court with MOFD.

"The Moraga-Orinda Fire District is following San Ramon Valley Fire District's lead in promoting better communication and cooperation between PG&E and local fire agencies. The bill being introduced by Assemblymember Bauer-Kahan goes a long way towards accomplishing this goal and will protect our communities statewide," MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker said.

The proposed bill does not prohibit a utility from conducting emergency maintenance work. The bill does require that electrical utilities give 48 hours' notice to local fire agencies when conducting potentially dangerous maintenance in high fire-risk areas.

"We are incredibly grateful for all the work that our local fire districts do to keep our communities safe, we hope that this bill will be another tool in their arsenal to fight potentially deadly fires," Bauer-Kahan said. PG&E had yet to take a position on the proposed legislation, stating, "While PG&E appreciates the author's intention, the bill as written appears to stand in contradiction to the commitment PG&E has made with the governor, legislature and our customers to focus on reducing wildfire risk and improving safety throughout our system. We look forward to working with the committees, author and all stakeholders on preventative measures to wildfire mitigation and to build a stronger and safer PG&E."

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