

Published June 23rd, 2021

Could a miracle save Orinda from PG&E transmission towers?

By Sora O'Doherty

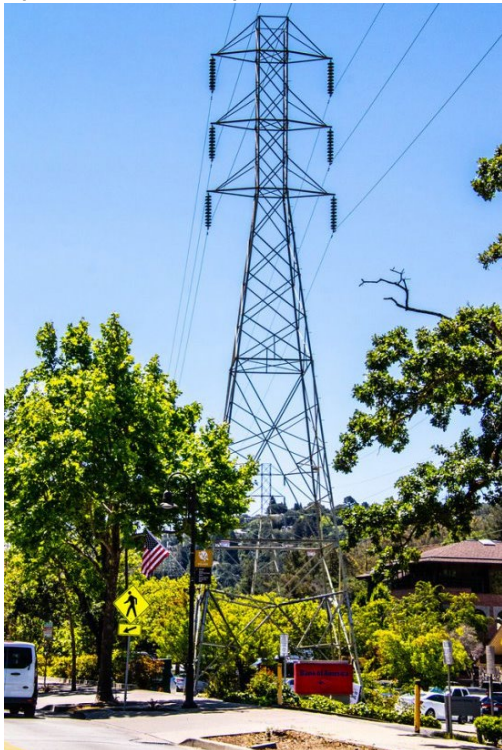


Photo Sora O'Doherty

Orinda's Downtown Subcommittee heard a tale of overwhelming obstacles to moving or undergrounding the unsightly Pacific Gas and Electric Company transmission towers that run right through downtown Orinda on June 10. But, buried in the doom and gloom was a tiny spark of hope, fanned by someone with experience of removing towers from Orinda. The meeting was attended, on Zoom, by Mark van Gorder and Vic Baker, who are stepping into the very large shoes vacated by the death of longtime community relations executive Tom Guarino, who died at the end of last year from complications of COVID-19.

Baker and van Gorder came prepared to discuss the issue of whether anything could be done to relieve Orinda of the burden caused by the transmission towers, which have the greatest impact on the Village side of the city.

The downtown subcommittee consists of city council members Inga Miller and Nick Kosla. Kosla took the lead at the meeting, as the two rotate running the meetings. The benefits and challenges of either placing the wires underground or moving them to a different location were reviewed. Undergrounding would eliminate the visual impact of the towers, and potentially could reduce the risk of fire. But the cost of undergrounding is huge, and even if the lines were undergrounded, structures could still not be built over the lines or the setbacks. Moving the lines could result in more open space for greater development potential, and might reduce the visual

impact of the towers in downtown, although they would still have an impact where they were moved to. While the cost would be less, it would still be very large. Other concerns include increased fire risks and concerns from residents, in addition to the fact that topography grading might be required for the towers, which might also touch lands owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District or in the unincorporated part of Contra Costa County where it borders Orinda.

The restrictions are that only landscaping and parking is allowed under the towers. No elevation is permitted, not even for a parking structure, nor a golf course. The same restrictions would apply even if the lines were undergrounded.

The costs of undergrounding the lines or moving the towers would be borne by the city. When a number of towers were moved from the valley that is now Wilder, the developer OGLLC paid to have the towers moved to the adjacent hill. Asked after the meeting, Bruce Yamamoto of OGLLC said that he recalled that the project cost over \$10 million.

The PG&E representatives were reluctant to give an estimate of costs without having all the parameters, but said that generally the cost of undergrounding transmission lines, which are distinct from distribution lines, runs to about \$100,000 to \$250,000 per linear foot, and might be even higher depending on the circumstances. Kosla guessed that undergrounding the lines could cost Orinda a quarter of a billion dollars, which the city could never afford.

The cost to relocate the towers and lines would be lower, but the PG&E representatives said they could not estimate what those costs might be without further study. The cost of the study alone could be between \$35,000 and \$50,000.

The possibility of moving the towers from their present location to run alongside Camino Pablo, crossing over the Safeway parking lot, and then continuing along Camino Sobrante was discussed. That plan would make about three acres of land available for development in the village. "Three acres isn't worth the numbers we are hearing," Kosla suggested. Council member Miller also questioned whether moving the lines over the Safeway parking lot might impede some future development there.

Very close to the end of the meeting, van Gorder tossed out an idea that Orinda would adore. PG&E, he

said, has been working on rebuilding a number of very old towers. Some of their towers are 50, 60 or 70 years old. He promised to investigate the age and condition of the towers in Orinda. If PG&E was going to rebuild the towers anyway, he said, it might be an opportunity to relocate them at potentially very little or no cost to the city. In 2016, PG&E removed a number of 85-foot steel transmission towers and power lines located in Orinda near the following streets: Brookwood Road, Longridge Road, Oak Road, Stein Way, Lloyd Lane, Moraga Way, Sunrise Hill Road. Those towers were removed because they were no longer necessary.

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