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Mail sorting issues resolved and address changes for Saranap clarified

By John T. Miller

After two community meetings, homeowners are overwhelmingly in favor of changing 465 Saranap area parcels from unincorporated Walnut Creek to unincorporated Lafayette in the County Assessor's database. All of the affected parcels are within the Lafayette School District boundary and the Lafayette Sphere of Interest.

The second meeting took place Oct. 5, after the United States Postal Service had denied a request and then denied

the appeal for a Zip Code Boundary Change of the parcels. The USPS has approved a Preferred Last Line for the parcels, so the homeowners change how their mail is addressed as either Walnut Creek or Lafayette.

The Postal Service change was originally proposed by a group of Saranap citizens and was put into effect in January. The change created some mishaps with delivery for several months, however the Postal Service has adjusted their geofencing software to

correct the issues.

The Oct. 5 meeting was hosted by County Supervisor Candace Andersen and Congressman Mark DeSaulnier. Cheri Valdivia, manager of customer relations for the USPS Sacramento District, was in attendance to outline the Preferred Last Line process and explained how the problems with mail delivery happened after the initial change, and how they have since been fixed.

An email from Andersen's Chief of Staff Gayle Israel noted

that after the meeting, Andersen decided that the community shows enough continuous support for the County Assessor's parcel number (APN) city name change. She plans to bring the item forward for a full Board of Supervisors discussion, most likely on Nov. 9.

A mailed notice about the discussion will go out to the affected parcels soon. There will be public comment on the item to all residents with an interest in the change to make their feelings known. The supervisors will then vote on whether

to direct the assessor to make the change to the affected parcels.

A change to unincorporated Lafayette will be in name only for the property APN. It will not move the parcels into incorporated Lafayette and the zip code will stay the same. Sorting the mail at the Walnut Creek Post Office, and the affected parcels, will continue to be recognized by the USPS as either Walnut Creek or Lafayette – it will be up to each resident to choose their Preferred Last Line.

Council agrees to fund joint tree assessment process between PG&E and city

By Lou Fancher

Seeking to resolve lingering litigation issues between the city of Lafayette and Pacific Gas & Electric Co. over the removal of over 200 trees – and involving a separate, 2017 lawsuit brought against the city by Save Lafayette Trees – the city council on Sept. 27 approved the expenditure of \$50,000 to fund a tree assessment process. The process will have the city and PG&E each bringing one gas pipeline safety expert and one tree expert/arboretologist together to form a four-member panel whose purpose will be to develop plans and criteria for the removal or preservation of the approximately 200 trees.

The group of experts, designated the "Tree Advisory Team," will conduct a joint risk assessment, develop findings, submit recommendations to Lafayette and PG&E, bring those recommendations to city council and make the information available to the public. If at the conclusion of the study the city and PG&E resolve the matter, a new agreement will be made and litigation between the two parties will be

dropped.

City Manager Niroop Srivatsa in presenting a staff report at the meeting said, "I want to stress that our intent is to minimize the number of trees, if any, to be removed. This process allows us to have a say in the criteria as well as in the tree assessment, something we have not had before." If either party disagrees with conclusions of the advisory team, Srivatsa said that either party can "walk away" and neither the city nor PG&E are obligated to form an agreement.

PG&E in the years-long dispute that began in 2014 with a region-wide program titled the "Pipeline Pathways" project claims the trees prevent first responders and crews from having immediate access to gas pipelines for inspections, routine maintenance, and shutoffs or repairs necessary during emergencies. Residents and supporters of Save Lafayette Trees along with Lafayette Homeowners Council, Sierra Club, the Pipeline Safety Trust, Audubon Society, the Lindsay Wildlife Experience and over 2,900 individuals in 2018 who signed a petition to prevent the

tree cutting are adamantly opposed to the tree removals.

PG&E has additionally asserted that tree roots pose a potential risk to pipeline safety. The company's original proposal had 1,200 trees being removed within city limits. In 2015, an updated list of trees was reduced to 272 trees on private and public property and the project was renamed as the Community Pipeline Safety Initiative (CPSI). The number of trees deemed "unacceptable risk" was further reduced to 207 in 2018.

The staff report included information related to the Lafayette Municipal Code: "The removal of more than 25 protected trees constitutes a Major Tree Removal Project per the Lafayette Municipal Code, requiring as mitigation, payment or planting, or combination thereof, equal to the full appraised value of the trees to be removed. The City's Consulting Landscape Architect, Michael Baefsky, independently evaluated each tree proposed for removal by PG&E in 2016, provided a tree appraisal for each protected tree per the City's regulations and calculated the mitigation fees for removing

those trees. In March 2017, the City Council authorized the City Manager to execute the Letter Agreement for Tree Removal with PG&E requiring PG&E to submit the information in compliance with the City's Tree Protection Ordinance and receive approval from the City before moving forward with the proposed tree removal or planting of mitigation trees, and to place the mitigation payments collected in a new restricted reserve fund."

Following the lawsuit by Save Lafayette Trees brought in response to the 2017 Letter Agreement between the city of Lafayette and PG&E, the gas and utility company in 2019 filed for bankruptcy. In 2020, PG&E sued the city in bankruptcy court over the 2017 Letter Agreement for Tree Removal. Srivatsa said PG&E still proposes to remove more than 200 trees, but to date has not submitted all the information necessary to process a tree removal permit. In an effort to stave off litigation and come to a new agreement to resolve the issues, Mayor Susan Candell with Srivatsa have met since early 2021 with PG&E representatives.

The staff report includes criteria for the selection of gas pipeline safety experts and for the arborists on the advisory team. Also included is detailed information about items included in the pipeline safety assessment such as the depth, diameter, pressure, age, coating, soil stability and corrosion parameters of the pipelines, among others. The arborists will assess if a tree poses an actual safety concern according to evaluation criteria including the species of the tree and its health and proximity to the pipeline.

In public comments during the meeting, Michael Dawson, co-founder of Save Lafayette Trees said he has walked the five pipelines and inspected every tree in question. Dawson said, "I am convinced there are no trees in Lafayette that pose a safety hazard." He added that he is optimistic PG&E will come to the same conclusion and while noting that pipeline integrity is paramount and of increasing importance, tree removal is not necessary to ensure gas pipeline safety for the community.



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