

Published September 5th, 2018

PG&E to address safety concerns at special meeting

By Pippa Fisher



Exposed high transmission gas pipeline along the Lafayette Moraga trail. Photo provided

The city will hold a special meeting Sept. 10 with officials from both PG&E and from the California Public Utilities Commission in order to address more than 150 safety concerns raised by local residents.

Members of the public took issue with a spring 2017 council decision allowing PG&E to remove hundreds of trees which, the utility company claims, hinder access to and pose a safety threat to the high transmission pipelines beneath them. The work is part of the Community Pipeline Safety Initiative.

Residents' concerns spread from the tree-cutting, which they claim is unnecessary, to other safety issues such as exposed pipeline, aging infrastructure and the lack of safety shut-off valves. In response residents formed the group Save Lafayette Trees. They are currently involved in a lawsuit they brought against the city and PG&E.

Public frustration with the utility company has led to this meeting, called by Vice Mayor Cam Burks.

"When I called for this city council public meeting, it was my hope that it would build and enable a new level of trust, transparency and confidence between the people of Lafayette and PG&E in the area of pipeline safety, and serve as a catalyst for follow-on, more functional and effective engagement," says Burks. "I am confident that we will achieve this goal to some degree on Sept. 10."

However SLT is a little less optimistic.

SLT co-founder Gina Dawson says that they appreciate the city council asking PG&E to answer their many questions, but notes, "The Sept. 10 meeting may be a step backwards, not forward. There's no guarantee PG&E will be complete, specific and truthful in their answers or that they don't see this meeting as a check-off box before they start removing trees from our neighborhoods."

PG&E spokesperson Jeff Smith says that the company appreciates the opportunity to address questions and concerns at the meeting. "We want our customers to be fully informed about our safety work," he says, noting that they will be providing written responses to the community's questions. The city expects these responses in time to be available for the meeting.

Burks expressed appreciation for PG&E's willingness to appear before the public with their foremost experts and leaders and says he's grateful to the CPUC for agreeing to attend. "The CPUC's presence was a critical objective of mine as it establishes an important factor of accountability tied to PG&E's responses to our community's questions and concerns."

"Since May 2017, as part of the CPSI, we have conducted a variety of outreach to share information, answer questions and receive feedback from the community," says Smith. "This includes informational booths at the Lafayette Reservoir and along the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail, door-to-door outreach, one-on-one meetings, and more recently, hosted an open house where residents could engage directly with our subject matter experts. Through these efforts, we interacted with over 200 local residents and provided hundreds of written responses."

Smith says that PG&E is continuing to work with city staff to review additional information, "including restoration plans and to determine the timing for this important gas safety work."

"We've heard clearly the dissatisfaction of many in our community around how PG&E has recently communicated with our residents in the area of pipeline safety," says Burks. "I'm personally very thankful to those who brought their concerns to us so we could take action by holding this meeting."

Dawson says SLT's ultimate goal is to get PG&E and the city to work with residents to jointly identify the safety priorities in the community but says they perceive "more than a taint of conflict of interest and lack of transparency."

"First off," says Dawson, "PG&E is paying for the city's legal fees pertaining to our lawsuit. This fiscal arrangement, aside from the \$500K the city received per the deal, may be compromising city representation of the facts."

Dawson says that unanswered questions have created doubt as to the validity of PG&E safety programs. "And worse yet, the integrity of PG&E gas pipeline running under our feet - to the point that we have taken our concerns to the CPUC, who is now conducting an audit of PG&E safety operations in Lafayette."

"To us, this meeting is about gaining commitments from council, PG&E, and the CPUC, meaningfully engaging with the community to help us regain trust in community pipeline safety. It's just a beginning."

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA