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Third-party engineering consultants to provide analysis of pipeline in Briones; history of prior concerns come to light

By Pippa Fisher



ConFire Assistant Fire Chief Will Pigeon gives a presentation to concerned Springhill Valley Homeowners Association members Sept. 18. Photo provided

Schreiber points out that back in 2015 she contacted PG&E in multiple emails with her concerns.

In an email response to Schreiber's concerns dated Feb. 18, 2015, PG&E's Mark Torres told her that the company was engaged in a project to return exposed pipeline in the park to underground and were aware of this particular location. "The pipeline should be within at least three feet underground and has become exposed over time due to soil erosion," he said in the email.

In a later email dated Aug. 20 PG&E's Greg Gillis confirmed, "Additionally, this pipeline is one that we have identified as part of a program we started at the beginning of the summer to rebury exposed lines."

When provided with and asked about this email exchange by Lamorinda Weekly, PG&E responded, "We take our customers concerns seriously and are looking into this. We will provide an update as soon as more information is available." As of press time, no further comment on the 2015 communications had been received.

Michael Dawson says that Schreiber's revelation that PG&E abandoned the fixes they admitted were necessary in 2015 deeply concerns them. "PG&E's continued claims of better pipeline safety mean nothing when they don't address blatant, immediate and serious safety concerns like sagging pipelines, overhanging trees, and rusting patches of bare metal," says Dawson. "The fact these potentially dangerous exposures are in a high-risk fire zone that could impact many neighborhoods makes their negligence unacceptable. We're asking PG&E not only to fix the exposed pipeline threats in Lafayette and Briones, but to also conduct a full safety review of their pipeline integrity in Lafayette."

PG&E spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian says the safety of their customers and communities they

Residents in the Springhill neighborhood are waiting to see a third-party expert's report, promised soon, on the 40-foot, exposed, high transmission pipeline near Buckeye Ranch Trail in Briones close to homes, for answers to their questions concerning its safety. Pacific Gas and Electric Company has inspected the section and an additional section that was discovered at the Girl Scout camp nearby and says both sections are safe.

The pipeline near Buckeye Ranch Trail, which appears to be unsupported and sagging in the middle, lies across an eroding creek bank, with trees leaning over the pipe in an area where other trees have recently fallen, has been the subject of media scrutiny lately, and was brought to PG&E's attention by Lafayette residents and Gas Safety Task Force Founders Michael and Gina Dawson who note that the Buckeye Ranch Trail section of pipeline was not included on PG&E's report of all exposed pipelines. However local resident Lisa

serve is PG&E's most important responsibility and says they want the East Bay community to know that the pipeline in Briones Regional Park is safe. "It has been, and continues to be, monitored as part of ongoing maintenance activities," she says.

Sarkissian says that the pipe segment near Buckeye Ranch Trail is operated as an intentional span across the ravine.

"Such spans are an accepted industry construction practice. As such, the span segment receives ongoing monitoring and inspections to ensure safe operations. We know through the results of our latest inspections that it continues to operate safely."

"We have taken several actions including: visiting the site on multiple occasions to take measurements of the pipe and the surrounding terrain, conducting erosion analysis and other geological observations, and performing weight-bearing load calculations," says Sarkissian. "In addition, PG&E is performing additional weight-bearing load calculations for a variety of operating scenarios. To do this, PG&E performed a detailed laser scan on Wednesday, September 18th. The data compiled to date verifies the safety of this pipeline."

PG&E has hired a third-party engineering and scientific consulting firm to perform the additional weight-bearing load analyses of the pipe span to determine potential public safety risks. Sarkissian says that in the coming days they will be conducting site visits to analyze additional segments of the line in the area to further verify the safety of the pipeline. PG&E will be performing a comprehensive site walk of the entire pipeline transmission system throughout Briones Regional Park and the city of Lafayette, and says it will take actions as appropriate on any findings.

Residents remain concerned, however, despite the reassurances from the utility. The Sept. 18 Springhill Valley Homeowners Association meeting was packed as people came to hear Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Assistant Fire Chief Will Pigeon and Moraga-Orinda Fire District Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein speak. The Dawsons were also on hand to answer questions.

SVHA President Susan Candell says the association will work as hard as they can to support PG&E on any mitigation work the utility deems necessary. The association has sent a letter to all stakeholders endorsing the concerns set out by ConFire Deputy Fire Chief Aaron McAlister in an earlier letter to PG&E.

In a Sept. 19 letter to the city council, Gina and Michael Dawson on behalf of the GSTF state, "Although PG&E let us know they intend to provide reporting on the two recently discussed exposed sections . we ask city council and management to join us, and amplify our requests by making a public call for transparent and comprehensive reporting on all exposed pipeline sections in Lafayette, an updated analysis of High Consequence Area (HCA), and Lafayette specific pipeline threat identification."

The letter continues, "That this is an opportune time for city council to reconsider the Community Pipeline Safety Initiative agreement goes without saying - a program unabashedly named for 'community pipeline safety,' when it clearly does not prioritize that safety entrusted to PG&E, should be unacceptable."

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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