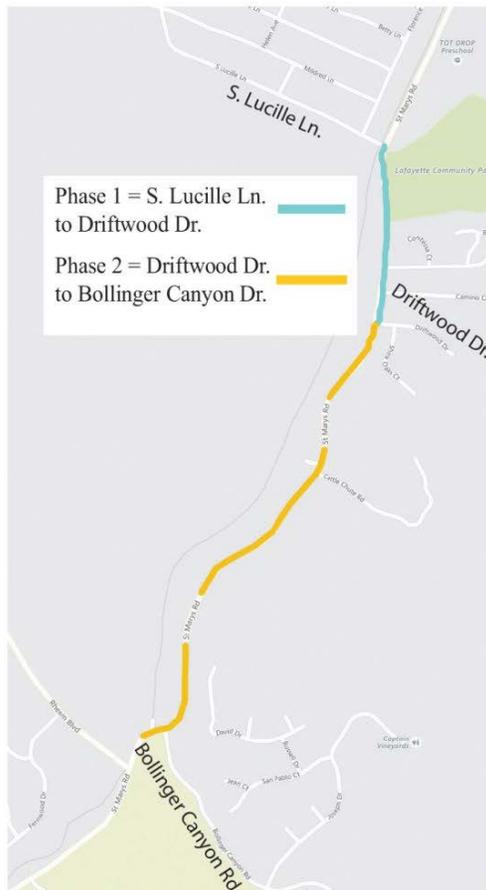




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PG&E to close St. Mary's Road for the summer

By Sophie Braccini



Pacific Gas and Electric Co. informed the city of Lafayette and the town of Moraga that it would have to replace a mile of pipe under St. Mary's Road in the coming months. The plan as it currently stands will completely close the arterial from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday, from June 7 to Aug. 17.

The utility is seeking encroachment permits from both municipalities to execute its plan, but several questions surfaced during the public presentations that were held last week: Why there and why now? Will the new pipe be safe? How will emergency access be handled?

A major PG&E communications effort is expected in the coming weeks.

When PG&E first came to meet the two cities it proposed a 100-day plan that would have partially closed the arterial, sometimes allowing for one-way traffic, but would have affected the school commute. Both staff teams asked PG&E for a shorter alternative that would impact the road only when school is out.

The work plan that was approved by both councils will start south of the South Lucille Lane intersection in Lafayette on June 7 and a first section of the road will be closed all the way to Driftwood Drive until July 20. The work on the second section from Driftwood Drive to the south of Bollinger Canyon Road should end on Aug. 17. During construction, through traffic will be rerouted from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and residents with no other access will be permitted on the road one at a time. The last phase, replacement of the valve at South Lucille Lane, will be completed after Aug. 17 but should not require closing St. Mary's Road.

About 40 Lafayette residents live on Dirftwood Drive, Shire Oaks Court, and Cattle Shute Road with no other outlet than that section of St. Mary's Road. In Moraga the entire Bluffs neighborhood of over 100 homes will be blocked at some point, plus the residents of unincorporated county land whose sole outlet to civilization is Bollinger Canyon Road. Serious impact is anticipated on Moraga Road and Moraga Way during the summer as residents go to and from Lafayette. One of the municipalities' first concerns is PG&E's outreach plan to those affected, so residents would not wake up one day and find their way to work, to camp for their kids, or simply out of their neighborhood blocked all day, including Saturdays. Both municipalities pushed for robust outreach. PG&E proposed letters, phone calls, large electronic signs, one or more public information meetings, as well as canvassing the most affected neighborhoods.

Regarding access for emergency and other utility vehicles, PG&E explained that if needed, the construction equipment would be removed from the road and the holes covered with plaques to permit access. Moraga council members were not satisfied that this would permit timely rescue in case of a medical emergency and asked that the possibility of using Saint Mary's College grounds and looking into a medical evacuation helicopter.

Other questions about deciding on this location were raised during the presentation, first by Lafayette residents Gina and Michael Dawson, and later echoed by some council members.

PG&E indicated that this section of pipe had to be replaced now because it dated back to the 1950s and needed to be increased in capacity because the population is growing. The agency said that their main concern is safety and that the California Public Utilities Commission mandates that it replaces 20 miles of aging pipes every year, and that the mile under St. Mary's Road was on that plan for this year.

It was impossible, however, to get data from the agency showing signs of aging of this pipe over other old pipes in the area and it was not clear if it had been inspected since 1986. PG&E did not respond to this question in time for publication but stated that it has conducted hydrostatic pressure tests of more than 1,100 miles of gas transmission line and installed thousands of control points along its system to read

pressure and flow rates and sent that information back to its state-of-the-art Gas Control Center located in San Ramon.

The other safety aspect of the new proposed pipe is that the emergency shut-off valve proposed so far only at Lucille Lane has to be closed manually in the case of an emergency, despite the fact that PG&E owns the technology to close valves automatically and remotely in case of an incident (https://www.pge.com/en_US/safety/gas-safety/safety-initiatives/valve-upgrades.page). At the April 26 Lamorinda joint council meeting a Moraga council member asked if demonstration of safety could be a condition given to PG&E to get the encroachment permit they need from both cities in order to start their work.

PG&E will obtain its encroachment permit from both public works departments and will then proceed with its construction plan; no further public discussion with the councils or commissions is required. The two public works departments will review the traffic plan, the repair plan for the road - which should include a complete slurry seal of that section of the arterial - hours of operation, and mobilization sites.

PG&E indicated that a place and date for an open house meeting for both communities had not yet been decided, and that there could be more than one meeting. The contact people from the PG&E who will respond to residents' questions will be listed in the letter residents are to receive.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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