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Environmental Task Force shares key goals with Lafayette council

By Lou Fancher

When members of the city's Environmental Task Force presented the committee's annual update May 9 at the city council meeting, ETF chair Nancy Hsu Hu said that after a hiatus for all of 2020, the committee in 2021 decided to "hit the ground running" and have shown significant momentum to develop and implement environmental policies and programs. Joining Hu in the presentation to the city council were vice chair Brenna Shafizadeh, ETF commission members Greg Meronek, Maria Gastelumendi, and Ashley Louisiana, and city planning technician and staff liaison to the ETF Joshua Miller.

In 2021, the committee identified three priority projects: a draft ordinance about EV charging and electrification of construction projects; a citywide move from gas to electric leaf blowers; and waste reduction related to single-use food ware.

Subcommittees created by the task force pursued priorities laid out by the city council that included an EV charging ordinance that would exceed future CalGREEN state requirements, building electrification, and single-use food ware policies directly tied to specific recycling and waste diversion percentage rates.

Hu said adopting an EV Charging Ordinance for multifamily construction would result in universal access for residents and provide equitable, basic levels of charging (instead of some multifamily building residents having a great deal of access and others having none). According to Hu, CalGREEN's standard is set at a level that means 60% of residents in a multifamily building will have no charging capability at all. Instead, the ETF recommends all new construction in Lafayette have Level One charging.

Given the high number of multifamily construction projects in Lafayette, the scarcity of EV chargers, Gov. Newsom's executive order banning all internal combustion vehicles by 2035 - and acknowledging that level one charging is slower - Hu said it is still better than having nothing at all. The committee sought council approval to submit their recommendation to the Planning Commission to begin the zoning text amendment process.

Shafizadeh reported that the ETF has researched 54 other communities in California that have established "reach codes" related to building electrification ordinances. While continuing to pursue outreach efforts for local input through hosted information events and online resources, the task force is working toward an ordinance that would have new buildings be all-electric and require some remodels to undergo re-electrification.

One example of such a "remodel," Shafizadeh said, would be the addition of a backyard ADU, for which no new gas lines would be installed and the unit would need to be all electric. A long-term goal for the city would be to cap all gas lines by 2045. In the meantime, an online webinar, links to rebates for electrification, and surveys to collect feedback from residents have been implemented.

Other action items recommended the council issue a city resolution stating a commitment for city workers to convert entirely to manual means (i.e. rakes) or electric leaf blowers. ETF also recommended placing a citywide ban on gas leaf blowers. Hu said that due to reservations about an outright ban expressed by Public Works and Parks and Recreation departments, a review of the city's ordinances should take place before making a citywide ban.

Consulting with nearby cities that have already made the transition was also recommended. Hu emphasized the difficulties of both gas and electric leaf blowers: the former has health negative impacts, the latter requires recharging, is less powerful and will result in "non-pristine lawns," Hu said, adding that those left-behind leaves are beneficial for soil.

An ETF recommendation for the council to adopt an ordinance reducing single-use food ware picked up on a draft created in 2019 that was stalled by COVID. Taking into account the ongoing concerns from local food businesses just getting back on their feet, she said crucial to next steps is feedback from stakeholders, engaged community members and restaurateurs.

The first phase would require straws and stirrers to be compostable fiber-based and provided only on request. It would also mandate compostable produce bags be used in grocery stores and food service businesses. Businesses would need to have three bins: compost, recycle and trash for customer's waste items. The second phases six months later would require all disposable containers (plates, cups, and more) to be fiber-based and only given out on request. There would be a 25-cent fee charged for disposable cups, and if eating in, businesses would be required to provide reusable utensils.

In public comments received prior to the meeting, four respondents supported gas leaf blower elimination or reductions. In the one public comment during the meeting, restaurant owner Robert Lavoie said it was disturbing to see the council trying to limit people's options. He encouraged them to adopt a "do-no-harm policy." Lavoie said mandating electrification and eliminating leaf blowers is not supported by people who use leaf blowers and "having one choice for energy is really not your business." He also said imposing costly ordinances (such as restrictions on single-use items) is not acceptable, but said encouraging people with Green Awards is good.

Other priorities for the ETF are to explore gray water systems, update the city's Environmental Action Plan that was last updated in 2017, conduct another Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory and identify funding sources, monitor the drafting of General and Specific Plans to promote sustainability, and draft and adopt a charter that includes a mission statement, long-term goals, and focuses on incorporating the city's latest vision and mission statement.

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[back](#)

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