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Gas Pipeline Tree Removal Revisited

By Cathy Tyson

About 300 Orinda residents will soon be receiving a letter from Pacific Gas and Electric Company about gas transmission lines that run through their property. The utility's Pipeline Pathways project from over a year ago is back, but overhauled to ditch the original chainsaw approach with a more collaborative move-the-tree tactic and renamed as the "Community Pipeline Safety Initiative." Acknowledging that there was room for improvement over the prior version of the plan, PG&E spokesperson Jeff Smith explained the utility is collaborating with residents to find a solution to make the pipelines safer and more accessible to first responders in the event of an emergency or natural disaster. He explained that PG&E will pay for all work and re-landscaping through shareholder dollars, so customer rates won't be impacted. Tree roots can damage underground pipeline.

Trees, certain shrubs like junipers, hot tubs, pool decks, storage sheds and sport courts should not be within five feet of either side of the pipe, but vegetable gardens, low lying vegetation or lawns are fine. Larger trees should be located at least 14 feet away. "We understand that some property owners may not be aware of the importance of first responders having immediate access to gas pipelines in the event of an emergency, agreements with PG&E, or the presence of the natural gas transmission pipeline on their property," said Smith. "As part of this program, we will work closely with property owners to ensure they understand the importance of keeping the area around the pipeline safe and clear. A map of our natural gas transmission pipelines is also available at www.pge.com/pipelinelocations."

Several Contra Costa County cities including Lafayette banded together last year to complain about the utility's plan to unilaterally chop down trees over pipelines without permits. The utility put the Pipeline Pathways project on hold, ultimately substantially changing it into the Community Pipeline Safety Initiative.

In Walnut Creek an estimated 735 trees on public and private property were slated to be removed according to the original plan. Steven Falk, city manager of Lafayette, said the utility has not yet met with city representatives to work on the new and improved initiative. The pipeline runs down Mt. Diablo Boulevard near the reservoir where large mature shade trees and a nearby riparian habitat are located. City leaders obviously support public safety, but pointed out that the utility should have been maintaining its pipelines all along.

"They have really revamped the program," said Orinda's city manager Janet Keeter. She explained that the city was originally advised there were 305 suspicious trees on public property, but after taking a closer look, only 11 were deemed unmanageable. Calling it "a more thoughtful approach" and "quite a relief," Keeter said that the utility would be looking at vegetation on a case-by-case basis. When asked if PG&E will get a permit for tree removal, she said it depends on the type of tree; the utility agreed to follow the city's rules and will get a permit for protected trees - for example, oaks. For those who receive a letter, the utility will make an appointment to send a representative out to assess the situation, and work with homeowners on a "shared solution" if the process unfolds as anticipated.

There are 5.3 miles of gas transmission pipelines in Orinda, one in the northern part of town along Lombardy Lane and Dalewood Drive, cutting through Briones Regional Park, and a southern section along Glorietta Boulevard and Moraga Way ending at Estabueno Drive.

Emphasizing that it's all about safety and first responder access, Smith said, "We want to make it as safe as possible for our customers."

The PG&E letter to residents will probably come as a surprise since, according to Smith, easements on properties may or may not have been recorded.

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