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Lafayette to form 'hybrid' citizen group on gas safety

By Pippa Fisher



It might not look exactly like what Save Lafayette Trees had in mind for establishing a safety task force, but, mindful of minimizing potential exposure to litigation, the Lafayette City Council has agreed to allow the formation of an independent citizens' task force from whom they will hear presentations at public meetings.

Late into the night at its March 11 meeting, the council made the decision allowing SLT co-founders Gina and Michael Dawson to begin forming an independent advisory group and to enable Vice Mayor Mike Anderson and Mayor Cam Burks to work with City Acting Planning and Building Director Greg Wolff to schedule meetings with PG&E, the CPUC, the council and the community. Such a group will not have council or staff involvement.

The city council deliberates at the March 11 meeting. Photo Jeff Heyman, City of Lafayette

Formed initially in response to the council's spring 2017 decision allowing the removal of hundreds of trees on both private and city-owned land which the utility claims

is needed for pipeline safety as part of the Community Pipeline Safety Initiative, SLT expanded its reach to address the lack of automatic shut-off valves, exposed pipeline, lack of testing and aging infrastructure. The group is currently suing PG&E and the city.

Wolff presented the staff report which outlined two main reasons why city staff did not recommend the formation of a safety task force as SLT had proposed, which would involve city staff members, citing the cost involved, and the potential for liability in the event of an incident.

Several residents spoke expressing serious doubts about the ability of PG&E to keep communities safe given recent fires and the San Francisco gas line explosion, and supporting the need for an advisory body of some sort.

Susan Callister of the Lafayette Homeowners Council reminded the council of the Homeowners Council's request made by letter March 10 from LHC President William Bucher calling for a "Need to move forward now with the formation of our citizens committee, separate and apart from PG&E, CPUC and the city council."

This suggestion - that it could be a group independent of the city council and staff - sparked the conversation leading to the setting up of this "hybrid" body. As Anderson pointed out the group can now be placed on the agenda to give presentations without a three-minute constraint.

Michael Dawson says that he is disappointed that there wasn't an approval of an official gas safety task force but says he was encouraged by the ultimate reaction of city council members, while noting that "city staff again deferred safety to the citizens of Lafayette, but the residents have already acted as informal Gas Safety Task Force members for the past couple of years. The city says safety is their number one priority, and yet chooses to be passive players in dealing with PG&E."

Burks says that he believes they have advanced a plan that suits everyone; a plan centering on the "core concern of public safety vis-à-vis PG&E operated pipeline safety in Lafayette.

"We did so in a way that I believe did not create liability for the city, and one that will give our public the opportunity to engage in an independent and impactful way - with strong, appropriate city support," Burks said.

The mayor commended the Dawsons for their sustained and unwavering commitment to safety in Lafayette, adding, "I am also very thankful to the Lafayette Homeowners Association's analysis and proposed solutions related to the situation and the personal engagement on Monday evening by Board Member Susan Callister. Ms. Callister's thoughtful comments and ideas materially helped us move forward."

Michael Dawson acknowledges progress. "The city council's support of better gas safety going forward is a small step, but a step in the right direction," he said. "We appreciate the city council's willingness to have a real discussion on this issue outside of the constraints of a council meeting."

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