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Council to keep talking gas safety; plans second meeting with PG&E, community and CPUC

By Pippa Fisher



Bollards remain in place where PG&E has been working to bury exposed pipeline along the Lafayette-Moraga Trail. Photo Pippa Fisher

The Lafayette City Council spent a short time at their Feb. 25 meeting discussing next steps in the formation of a safety task force and what exactly that might look like. The subject will be on the March 11 meeting agenda.

Gina Dawson, co-founder with her husband Michael Dawson of Save Lafayette Trees, was disappointed that the item was included in the February meeting only as a continuation on the consent calendar.

SLT, a local organization which formed in 2017 in an attempt to stop Pacific Gas and Electric Company's planned tree removal program, which the utility wants to do as part of their Pipeline Safety Initiative since it claims the roots damage underground high transmission pipes and hinder emergency access, has been pushing for the formation of a safety task force with the idea that it would work with the city, the utility and the California Public Utilities Commission. Initially SLT involvement

centered around planned tree removal, but it led the Dawsons to be increasingly concerned about a wider scope of pipeline safety issues. SLT is currently suing the city and the utility.

But should the city form a task force headed by the people who are currently suing them? What would such a task force look like?

City attorney Mala Subramanian advised against having members of SLT on such a task force. And Mayor Cam Burks advised caution regarding the city taking it upon themselves to set up any type of regulatory body.

"The Dawson's have done a lot for the community in this space, and I am grateful for their efforts," Burks said later, but added, "We need to be careful as a city to not represent ourselves - or even give the appearance of representing ourselves - as an oversight or regulatory body when it comes to pipeline safety as we don't have the subject matter expertise to do so, and we certainly don't have a state mandate or authorities as a regulatory body in this space."

Gina Dawson is frustrated. "The city's consistent kicking of the pipeline safety can down the road is frustrating," she said. "The news . from the city attorney that Save Lafayette Trees members could not be appointed to the task force because of pending litigation was surprising as this item has been on the agenda for many past council meetings. We sent initial purpose and proposal to the city a month ago and we've been discussing draft charters for the task force in good faith with Vice Mayor Mike Anderson since last summer - we're appreciative of his efforts."

Furthermore Gina Dawson says that by virtue of their efforts over the past two years, Save Lafayette Trees has already become an informal gas safety task force.

"We've researched for countless hours, spoken with pipeline safety experts, presented at safety conferences, and importantly, engaged with the CPUC. We helped instigate the development of the Lafayette Pipeline Safety Alliance - the collaboration of PG&E, CPUC, and the community (city and residents together) - all for improved gas pipeline safety."

Burks says he is eager to agendize the item. "The issues are complex and an open session, with public input, is necessary to understand solutions and strategies. I have made it clear over and over that my main concern is for the public safety of our community," he said.

At the same meeting both Gina and Michael Dawson expressed dismay over the city's Feb. 21 Almost Daily Briefing email which featured as its lead story an article from the Northern California Record with the headline "Court grants PG&E's reconsideration and denies Save Lafayette Trees protected tree petition." Michael Dawson accused the city of giving an "erroneous and false" headline knowing that "distributing this story would give residents a false impression that PG&E had won a new ruling."

Subramanian responded by saying that the city cannot change a headline.

"The Almost Daily Briefing is a collection of published articles related to Lafayette. The city does not change the headline or content of any article, and simply presents the stories to the community so that people are aware of what is being written about Lafayette," said Jeff Heyman, communications analyst for the city of Lafayette.

"The article in question was published by a legal journal serving Northern California, and the city had no hand in authoring the article or its headline," Heyman added.

Michael Dawson was disappointed that the city did not issue a correction. "This biased article was written by a national organization with a specific mission to enact business-friendly tort laws, and was falsely made to look like local news. Not only does the city need to vet their top story news links, they need to do a better job being honest and transparent in their communications."

Heyman says that the city will be submitting a staff report to the council detailing the Almost Daily Briefing production process at the March 11 meeting.

Meanwhile Burks says that the city is moving forward to arrange a second meeting with the community, the city council, the CPUC and PG&E. A previous meeting with these parties took place in November. They are currently looking at dates in March and Burks says it will include senior/high-level stakeholders who are in a position to make decisions.

"So the city is certainly not sitting on our hands - we are actively facilitating engagement/collaboration in the interests of public safety," Burks said.

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