

# Power-line Watchdogs Hear from PG&E

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By Ron McNicoll

With memories of a rescinded proposal for big, new power lines and towers through South Livermore still fresh in their minds, members of an ad hoc committee heard a PG&E spokesman talk about whether his firm will try to do the same.

Ed Bedwell, PG&E director of state government relations, met with the Ad Hoc Renewable Energy Group last Tuesday at the Martinelli Events Center in Livermore to listen to the group's concerns, and talk about the early stage of planning for PG&E's future transmission lines.

PG&E is looking at a route within a 40-mile boundary coming down from the north. However, there is no way to tell now whether any power lines would be coming through South Livermore.

The ad hoc group was formed after a proposal by a consortium of five public power agencies dropped its plan to build 600 miles of transmission lines that would have included a path through the south Valley.

Most of the route would have been adjacent to the swath already cut by old lines now present, which are owned by PG&E. Winegrowers, the Livermore and Pleasanton city councils, the Tri-Valley Conservancy, and Supervisor Scott Haggerty were among those who expressed antipathy to the plan, and criticized the group for a perceived lack of notice to the public.

Members of the new ad hoc committee include planners from Alameda County, Livermore, and Pleasanton, and representatives of the Tri-Valley Conservancy, the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association, LARPD, and EBRPD.

The committee's intention is to keep informed of developments in the power industry in regard to any future plans in the Valley.

Much of the future energy transmitted throughout California and out of California to other states will be in renewable energy. That's fine with the group, members said at the meeting. However, how that is accomplished with transmission lines in this area is of the utmost importance.

Bedwell said that PG&E is looking at the future demand in northern California, and the overall demand of the growing state. The firm wants to access renewable energy in the eastern part of the Pacific Northwest and northern California. However, its power lines are along a more westerly corridor. That might necessitate coming up with a new power corridor, said Bedwell.

PG&E's planning is not as far along as the public agencies comprising Transmission Agencies of Northern California (TANC) had brought their plans. Bedwell said that PG&E is about two to three years behind the TANC planning.

PG&E has several key differences from TANC, said Bedwell. For one thing, it plans to involve the communities along the route it selects. Failure to do that was a big public relations problem for TANC, he said. He implied it was responsible for the end of the plan. However, TANC members said that the plan was terminated because the economics were not going to work out.

Also, TANC was going to build the transmission lines first, so there would be a way for some firms to develop green power in Lassen County. "It was a chicken and egg situation, said

Bedwell. "Do you develop the power first, then build the lines, or build the lines, then develop the power?"

PG&E knows that it will be obtaining green energy from the Washington-Oregon area. Some is hydroelectric, and some is wind-power. Unlike the Altamont, where winds don't always blow, the Columbia River Valley has pretty steady winds from 8 a.m to 8 p.m. daily. That will be a very reliable green power supply, said Bedwell.

The Columbia River Valley will be a good power source in summer when air conditioners are operating in California, said Bedwell. In winter, the power lines would carry California wind and solar power north for the electric heating season in the Northwest.

In the big picture, the cost of upgrading power transmission facilities to carry the power will be from \$15 billion to \$20 billion. The Obama administration has helped by making a financial commitment to updating the old infrastructure, said Bedwell.

Power companies, whether private or non-profit municipal, are under a state mandate eventually to make 33 percent of their power generation green. Another spur to move forward with infrastructure is the population projection of 40 million Californians in the near future, despite the current economic downturn. The state's population last year was 36.7 million.

Bob Baltzer, a public member of the committee, told Bedwell that Valley residents might be more comfortable dealing with PG&E than they were with TANC. PG&E already owns the towers in the Valley, and has some familiarity in working with local governments about past power updates. "Better the devil you know, than the devil you don't now," said Baltzer.

Also, PG&E is regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission. TANC, as a consortium of public agencies, had no such oversight, said Baltzer.

Bedwell was asked whether PG&E could locate its lines along the same towers as some other power company. In general, firms don't do that, he said. However, Energy Secretary Steven Chu is on record as saying that the federal government won't "approve six or seven sets of power lines on federal land," said Bedwell.

The "culture is changing," said Bedwell. Where possible, power lines might be upgraded from 125 kilovolts to 230 or from 230 to 500 kv to carry the maximum load without having to add more lines.

Asked about putting lines underground, Bedwell replied that it's difficult to put a major line underground, because of the need to cool the hot lines underground using oil as an insulator.