

Neighbors Say Proposed PGE Substation Mars Environment



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by Jack Foley

Residents of one of Gilroy's most beautiful and environmentally fragile areas are fighting mad because PG&E is considering it for a power substation.

Rural home and property owners fear such an installation would ruin the ecosystem and forever mar a pristine and historic country lane that is a designated scenic county roadway and part of the region's tourist-drawing wine trail.

Redwood Retreat Road in west Gilroy is one of eight sites being studied by the utility company for a 10-acre substation as part of its South County Power Connect project that would help strengthen the local power grid and make it more reliable now and in the future.

Bryan Stolle, a venture capitalist who owns land PG&E is considering for its project, said Monday, "I would be vehemently against anything sited on Redwood Retreat Road, and if they wanted to do anything on the backside of the property there still might be neighbors annoyed. I am not looking to sell and have no interest in selling, the property is not on the market."

The founder and former CEO of Agile Software and founding partner of Wildcat Venture Partners, Stolle owns a 55-acre parcel in the area. He said a substation on his property would "destroy the ambiance" of the Redwood Retreat Road.

In spite of receiving some letters from the utility, he said he remains uninformed about the process PG&E is involved in or whether the company could threaten to use eminent domain to acquire his land.

neighbors that PG&E has not been completely forthcoming about its plans.

"They don't really provide a lot of information," he said.

Stolle added, "They are a huge powerful bureaucracy and I have no idea what our ability to fight it is. At the end of the day, they are the big giant that gets to do what they want to do and I don't know what we could do [about it]."

All the sites under study for South County Power Connect are in Gilroy and Morgan Hill, but it is the Redwood Retreat Road location, near Watsonville Road, that has area residents and those on nearby El Matador Drive angry.

A well on Redwood Retreat Road supplies water to about 70 homes on El Matador Drive.

"It is absolutely unbelievable that PG&E has the capability of making this decision, with all its myriad of implications for quality of life (human and animal) for generations to come," Linda Pond said Monday in an email to PG&E which she shared with the Dispatch.

In an interview, she cited among many concerns the endangered and protected plant animal species, such as steelhead trout and mountain lion, water quality, fire safety and property values.

Pond's family has lived on and farmed the land, where she and her son now operate Fernwood Cellars, since 1863. One family member started Redwood Retreat in 1891, a metaphysical resort that drew clients from the Bay Area and beyond and gave its name to the road.

Over the years, the two-lane road has been the site of horse farms and vineyards, a reported visit by Robert Kennedy and home to famed writer Robert Louis Stevenson's widow, Fanny, who built a house that still stands in the redwoods at the base of Mount Madonna.

John Tepoorten, whose property adjoins the PG&E candidate site, said he was incredulous when a Santa Clara County official told him the county has no jurisdiction in the matter, that it's between PG&E and the state Public Utilities Commission.

Citing a PUC general order, Tepoorten said the county does indeed have a say, if not final say, in what happens. It can bring the utility company to the negotiating table and force a hearing before the PUC on the matter, according to Tepoorten, who distributed 100 flyers about the PG&E move to neighbors.

He was critical also of the way PG&E notified residents, saying they initially sent what amounted to a postcard resembling junk mail.

Tepoorten also chided county District One Supervisor Mike Wasserman for not responding to emails from residents concerned about the project and for not taking a stand against the Gilroy site when its historic and ecologically fragile character has been touted by the supervisor as a county wine trail.

Wasserman responded Monday, saying every email and letter he receives on the topic is forwarded to PG&E's government affairs official. He said if the county can influence the decision, he will make sure it does even though the PUC has final say.

Wasserman said he understands residents concerns and is on their side when it comes to the Redwood Retreat Road location.

"Do I personally think this is not a good choice? Absolutely, I can say that definitively," he said.

All of the reasons cited by residents, he said, "are very good reasons why that site should not be chosen."

Residents also suggested PG&E has been less than transparent about plans for the South County Power Connect project.

But Nicole Liebelt, a spokeswoman for the utility, said PG&E does take residents concerns into account and will abide by all laws regarding protected species and cultural resources. She outlined ways the utility has reached out to residents of the area and the South County community at large.

The outreach included three rounds of open houses, the last in mid-July, during which the eight options were presented and discussed.

The project and open houses were publicized via postcards to 15,000 households, businesses and PG&E customers, including all those within 500 feet of the proposed power corridors.

Specifically, mailings went to 91 residents of El Matador Drive and 49 residents of Redwood Retreat Road, Liebelt said.

The open houses also were advertised in four local newspapers, on five radio stations and on numerous posters, websites and social media platforms in South County, she said.

For Kurt Jacobsen, those notices were not enough. The Redwood Retreat Road resident said he attended an open house at the Gilroy Senior Center three weeks ago and found more PG&E representatives in attendance than residents while he was there because word had not gotten out.

Jacobsen said PG&E assured everyone that its chemical-laden transformers were safe years ago and it was later found out they were not. He said the same could happen with chemicals used today in substations.

For more information on PG&E's South County Power Connect project, visit http://bit.ly/2bvqisi.











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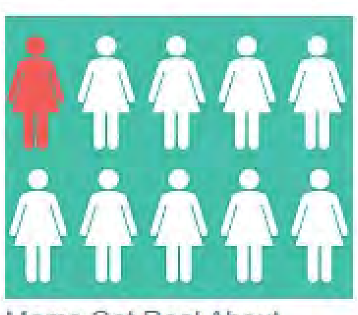

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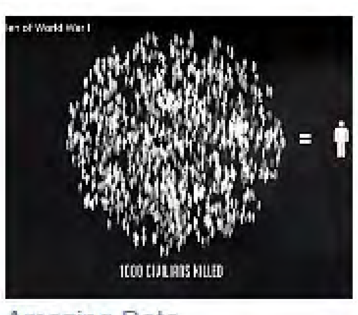

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