

Power grab in Hot Tubistan

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It's easy to feel sheepish about living in Marin County - the butt of jokes throughout America for our latte-sipping, liberal-bubble ways.

Last Earth Day, however, I saw a side of Marin that thrilled me down to the soles of my Ugg boots.

In a move boldly addressing the global energy crisis sidelined in Washington and on the presidential campaign trail, county leaders unveiled a plan to offer Marin some of America's greenest electricity. By buying our own power, they say, we could get 25 percent renewable energy right away, and 50 percent within five years, at a cost equal or less than we pay now.

The plan is now being shopped around to Marin's 11 city and town councils. If enough of them get on board, by next year we could be heating our world-famous hot tubs with a lot fewer greenhouse-gas emitting fuels. And what does that spell? G-o-o-d k-a-r-m-a. U.S. power plants, fired mostly by coal and natural gas, now emit about 40 percent of America's global warming fumes. That's what makes this local-power plan such a hopeful sign for progress against climate change.

There's just one catch - though it's a big one. Before we can start buying new windmills and solar panels, we need to break away from the Pacific Gas and Electric Co.: Northern California's \$12.5 billion energy behemoth. The shareholder-owned firm has been selling itself as the greenest in the land, trumpeting new investments in solar power and running "Green Is" ads on the front page of The Chronicle.

To be sure, PG&E really does offer cleaner energy than most other U.S. utilities. But to be honest, that doesn't say much.

PG&E uses less dirty coal, but 22 percent of its energy supply is nuclear, and another 44 percent comes from gas, a fossil fuel. With just 13 percent renewables, it's off-track to meet the California mandate of 20 percent renewable energy by 2010. And now, facing grassroots charges that its green rep is fueled by hot air, being outgreened - even by verdant Marin - could be a major blow.

Especially because Marin isn't alone. Several other California communities, including PG&E's headquarters city, San Francisco, have been considering similar breakaway plans. What makes it all possible is a 2002 California law called Community Choice Aggregation. Similar legislation has passed in Massachusetts, Ohio, New Jersey and Rhode Island, with several community power consortiums now up and running out East.

So CCA is now the wonky acronym for a grassroots energy revolt, fueled by eco-anguish. Throughout the land, Americans are stuck in the awful disconnect between news of melting sea ice and the baby-step strategies being shot down in Congress. We yearn to do more than change our lightbulbs.

More than 60 percent of Marin residents have said we'd pay more for county-supplied green power. But the beauty is that we won't have to. Renewable energy prices are stable, compared to the rising costs of coal and oil. And prices for solar and wind power are getting more cost-competitive all the time. Locally owned utilities, such as those in Sacramento and Palo Alto, are already providing greener power than PG&E at substantially lower rates.

What's more, for a power grab, Marin's plan is staunchly conservative, the fruit of five years of study and analysis. PG&E would still handle transmission and billing. Residents will also get four chances to opt out, should they desire. PG&E is nonetheless fighting to keep its customers, and even I've been courted. Last week, my utility mailed me a brochure with a beautiful photograph of Marin's green rolling hills, inviting me to join a "Green Community Partnership. No mention of Marin's clean-energy plan - instead, it merely plugged PG&E's Solar Power Basics classes and a voluntary carbon-offset program. One illustration showed - yep - a woman changing a lightbulb.

It made me just as mad as I am proud of Marin's groovy civic responsibility.

I do realize cities and even states can't stop climate change alone. The White House has to get involved, like ASAP, with new laws, technology, and a lot of diplomacy. Still, for now, I'm enjoying this new perspective of my home county as less of a bubble and more of a beacon for overdue change.

Going green

Governments, in addition to Marin County, looking at Community Choice Aggregation include:

- San Francisco
- Berkeley
- Oakland
- Emeryville
- Los Angeles County
- San Diego County

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