

“Hit job” on Marin Clean Energy

By Rebecca Bowe, December 08, 2009 San Francisco Bay Guardian

In a report officially released yesterday, the Marin County Civil Grand Jury tore apart Marin Clean Energy, a community-choice aggregation program that is intended to reduce the region’s greenhouse-gas emissions to address climate change.

The Civil Grand Jury report called the project “costly and extremely risky” and recommended that the whole effort be abandoned. It criticized the program as adding another layer of bureaucracy at a time when resources are limited, and described it as being plagued with uncertainty. The report was titled “Pull the Plug,” and it warned of risks ranging from market volatility to legal costs if Pacific Gas & Electric should take steps to attack the effort once it is launched.

“The county and all participating municipalities of Marin Energy Authority should step away from their adversarial political posturing and seriously work with foundations, federal, state and local agencies and PG&E to foster cooperation,” the Civil Grand Jury report recommended.

The report was released on the same day as the start of the historic United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, and coincided with the Environmental Protection Agency’s ruling that greenhouse gases endanger human health. MEA Chair and Marin County Supervisor Charles McGlashan said the timing was poignant, and called the civil grand jury report “a purposeful hit job by a biased group of conservative people in the county” that is “riddled with errors and misinformation.”

According to McGlashan, energy customers who accept the transition to MCE would automatically begin using electricity that is 25 percent greenhouse-gas-free, as opposed to PG&E’s 15 percent GHG-free power, with no difference in price.

McGlashan also said that the report makes false claims that the program would place an undue burden on Marin taxpayers. Nor would it impact the general funds of participating cities, he said, because the Marin Energy Authority, a Joint Powers Authority, would operate independently. “There actually is no risk to the taxpayer,” McGlashan said. “We’ve repeatedly answered the accusation over and over again that that cities are at risk,” he added. “The grand jury, by repeating that nonsense, is not helping anybody.”

The release of the report also coincides with a 90-day review period in which participating cities are evaluating an energy-supplier contract and voting whether to remain a part of the program.

PG&E has sent representatives to public meetings about Marin Clean Energy. The utility has been a vocal opponent since the program would reduce its customer base. The arguments put forth in the Civil Grand Jury report were “suspiciously similar” to PG&E’s rhetoric, McGlashan told the *Guardian*.

Suspicion is also swirling because PG&E had a copy of the report before the Civil Grand Jury released it to the public. In an email forwarded to the *Guardian*, a member of the public informs Mill Valley Council members that he got the report from David Rubin, PG&E’s director of service analysis, on Dec. 4. The report wasn’t publicly released until Dec. 7, but the date printed on the report is Dec. 2. An early leak would constitute a violation of the law. McGlashan has requested that district attorney look into the matter.

The Civil Grand Jury is comprised of 19 members and six alternates, all residents of Marin County. Nine of them reside in cities that aren’t participating in the Marin Clean Energy program. The Civil Grand Jury does not publicize whom it interviews for investigations, but it does publish a list of documents that informed its analysis. Although the grand jury was provided with Marin Clean Energy’s

implementation plan, it was not included in the list of documents that were reviewed, according to program interim director Dawn Weisz. "It's unfortunate," she said. "We went through a lot to get it to them."

Marin Clean Energy is scheduled to clear an important hurdle when the MEA Board votes to finalize a contract with an energy provider Feb. 4. Shell Energy North America is apparently the front-runner of three companies that are competing for the bid, and the MEA has weathered some criticism for considering a partnership with a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, which is known for human-rights violations in Nigeria. If the contract is executed and the eight Marin cities stick with the program, customers will automatically switch to MCE unless they opt out and decide to stay with PG&E service.

The initial goal of the program is to provide power sourced from at least 25 percent renewable resources at rates that are equal to or less than that of PG&E, while customers who want to purchase 100 percent renewable power can do so at a premium.

The Marin Energy Authority has been in discussion with San Francisco Sup. Ross Mirkarimi, who has been instrumental in developing San Francisco's own community-choice aggregation program, about possible collaboration between the two entities. "That is still something we'll continue to discuss and explore," said Weisz, MCE's interim director, but added that so far no specific proposals have been made.

*By **Rebecca Bowe**: December 08, 2009 04:33 PM*

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