

Mill Valley on board with energy initiative

Christian Goepel, 01/05/2010 Marin IJ

After a marathon public hearing that ended early Tuesday morning, the Mill Valley City Council reaffirmed its desire to remain involved with the Marin Clean Energy initiative.

The council did not take a formal vote, but no council member spoke up when Mayor Stephanie Moulton-Peters asked whether anyone wanted to make a motion to withdraw from the program.

The Marin Energy Authority would compete with Pacific Gas and Electric Co. by purchasing power from a utility that would supply more energy from renewable sources in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"Without a choice, folks are forced to pay what is in their bill or go without electricity," said Dawn Weisz, interim director of the Marin Energy Authority. "The MCE is a workhorse that doesn't burden the taxpayer or general fund. ... We won't sign a contract unless the cost is less than or the same as our incumbent utility."

The meeting, which began at 7:30 p.m. Monday and ended at 12:15 a.m. Tuesday, was attended by about 65 people. It featured passionate discussion by energy officials, council members and citizens for and against Mill Valley's involvement in the energy trade.

"The risks are relatively known and understood, but will be mitigated," said Councilman Garry Lion. "We need to move forward with the information we have now."

Former Assemblyman Joe Nation, a spokesman for PG&E said the energy authority is "a huge expansion of government. Most of the public isn't aware about what is going to happen."

Bob Silvestri of Mill Valley called for a slower tempo.

"If MCE is such a great idea, then why are we in such a rush?" he asked. "Let the public vote in a ballot initiative."

Weisz said that the seven-year process has been subject to six peer reviews and 100 public meetings.

"This is not rushed; it's a deliberative process," she said.

Utility customers who wish to stay with PG&E would be allowed to opt out of Marin Clean Energy and would receive at least four notices to do so, Weisz said. Customers would have 60 days prior and 60 days after MCE becomes operational to make a decision.

"If we opt out as a city, businesses and residents will not get the chance to participate," Moulton-Peters said.

Greg Stepanicich, Mill Valley city attorney and general counsel for the energy authority, said that Mill Valley could withdraw from Marin Clean Energy with six months' notice. Customers would be able to remain with the program even if the city opted out and they also could opt in at any time, but must pay PG&E an exit fee to do so.

The energy authority board received 12 bids for energy supply and voted unanimously Nov. 9 to approve a five-year draft contract with Shell Energy North America, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell. A final contract approval is scheduled for Feb. 4, when the board could pick a different supplier.

"Never before have I seen such a blatant conflict of interest as I have this evening," said Clayton Smith

of Mill Valley, one of about 25 people who spoke out during the public hearing. "Inviting Shell Oil into local politics of Marin and expecting politics to be clean ... this is going to be a cesspool of corruption."

Councilwoman Shawn Marshall, an authority board member, said she was disappointed about Shell Energy, too.

"Shell offered us the least risk with the lowest cost," she said. "There will be short-term pain for long-term gain."

The authority, created as a joint powers authority in 2008, includes all the county of Marin and all Marin cities except Corte Madera, Larkspur and Novato. Also this week, San Rafael on Monday reaffirmed its desire to stay on board, and San Anselmo is set to consider the matter Wednesday.

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