

EDITORIAL: PG&E, ever a bully, fights community power



Employee's from Premier Power of El Dorado Hills put solar panels on a residential home in Placerville. As questions heat up over how we'll meet our future energy needs, many suggest the we think local.

FRESNO BEE FILE

The city of Davis' small solar power plant is not much to look at. Rows of panels are arrayed on 20 acres behind a cyclone fence on Road 102 north of town. Though the solar panels power City Hall, the plant is underused and a testament to Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s bull-headed opposition to communities that try to offer alternative ways for residents to purchase and distribute power.

Davis is one of roughly 30 cities across California seeking to get out from under the thumb of private utilities, while ensuring that the utilities receive reimbursement for the cost of operating the massive power grid upon which we all depend.

You might think PG&E executives would have more pressing worries than to fret over what is known as community choice aggregation.

A federal grand jury indicted the utility on obstruction-of-justice charges last year stemming from the 2010 natural gas line explosion that leveled a San Bruno neighborhood and killed eight people. The California Public Utilities Commission imposed a \$1.4 billion fine against PG&E last fall over the explosion. And last week, the California Department of Justice searched the homes of former CPUC President Michael Peevey and a former PG&E vice president as part of an investigation into Peevey's relationship with PG&E.

Despite all that, utilities fight communities at every step.

Davis city leaders envision using the 20-megawatt facility to supply electricity to residents who don't want to install or can't afford to install rooftop solar panels but want to switch to green energy. The electricity would come at a discount. At least, that is the hope. Perhaps it will come to pass. But it has been a long time coming.

Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, began pushing legislation four years ago that sought to authorize Davis and its partner, Cleanpath Ventures of San Francisco, to sell power to Davis residents. The bill died at the end of the legislative session in 2012.

Wolk persisted by modifying the measure in 2013. At the end of the 2013 session, utility lobbyists intervened with an amendment that shifted the fight to the CPUC. Finally, the commission issued a decision last week. It directs the utility to engage in negotiations with the city over a final plan. If they fail to resolve it in a month, the commission can reassert its jurisdiction.

Having watched the utility for years now and invested \$500,000 in the project, Matt Cheney, the founder of Cleanpath, has become skeptical. He is worried that the power, he said, will cost too much. "They do not play nice," he said of PG&E's lawyers and lobbyists.

The commission's action last week applied beyond the city of Davis. And PG&E issued a news release declaring that it had won permission to offer electric customers in much of the state a "new clean energy program ... for a modest cost premium each month."

In other words, the utility will offer electricity generated by solar and wind, but at a price above current rates.

Homeowners with the wherewithal can install rooftop solar panels and cut their electricity bills. Many of the ones who are left are renters and lower-income people for whom rooftop solar is not a good option. We have our doubts that people of limited means will pay a premium for green power, the happy news release aside.

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