

EAST BAY EXPRESS

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Electricity May Go Green and Local

Alameda County is moving toward a more locally generated sustainable energy system, but a bill in the state legislature could block the plan.

By Jean Tepperman



We may walk or bike to work, shop local, grow our own vegetables, and dine at farm-to-table restaurants, but one of our biggest daily expenditures — energy — is typically unsustainable. In Northern California, our dollars are used to pay for fossil fuels that originate from outside the state, pollute the environment, and speed up climate change. But residents of Alameda County could get more of their energy from renewable sources and boost the local economy at the same time by replacing our utility provider, PG&E, with a local public electricity agency. The county board of supervisors voted unanimously last week to move toward creating a "Community Choice" energy system — although a bill currently in the state legislature could stop the project before it gets off the ground.

"We want to save people money and develop a cleaner energy portfolio," said Community Development Director Chris Bazar, in presenting

the Community Choice proposal to the supervisors. "This has been achieved in Marin and Sonoma" — the two Bay Area counties that already have Community Choice energy supplying electricity to most customers.

Community Choice "is the most effective way to reduce local greenhouse gas emissions," said Sierra Club Conservation Organizer Jess Dervin-Ackerman, because a public energy agency can make it a priority to buy clean energy. "With PG&E, we have no control over where our energy comes from."

A local public electricity agency could provide electricity at competitive prices, Bazar said, because it would be big enough to negotiate good prices with energy producers and could encourage the development of new sources of energy. In addition, he said, the agency would have different priorities from PG&E. "As a public body," he said, "It's not about shareholders. It's about the most comprehensive clean energy portfolio at the lowest cost." He noted that the Marin and Sonoma Community Choice agencies have increased the share of renewable energy and lowered prices. They also offer customers the option of paying higher rates for energy from 100 percent renewable sources.

In addition, a Community Choice energy system could boost the local economy by fostering the development of local clean-energy generation projects. "That could be anything from more solar panels on the roofs of individual houses to going down to the NUMMI plant and plastering the roofs, parking lots, and disturbed areas with solar panels," said Bruce Jensen, senior planner with the county Community Development Department. Local energy production also would produce local jobs — potentially 2,400 new ones, according to an analysis published last February by a coalition of clean energy groups.

The county already has some clean-energy generation capacity, such as the Altamont Pass wind farm. But few local clean energy projects have developed in the East Bay, because a PG&E energy monopoly leaves little room for them, said Al Weinrub, coordinator of the Local Clean Energy Alliance. "When you are in control of the process," he noted, "you can encourage the development of local initiatives."

For example, if people have rooftop solar panels that generate more energy than they use, PG&E now buys that extra electricity, but only credits it to customers' accounts. Payments are also low, and the current program will end in three years. By contrast, Marin Clean Energy pays "the full retail rate," Weinrub said. "It's an incentive for people to generate more energy than they use — to cover their whole roof with solar panels."

A Community Choice agency could also buy clean energy from local producers through a "feed-in tariff" system that promises a stable, predictable price, making it possible for small producers to develop and finance

energy-production projects. Such systems already operate on a small scale in Marin and in some areas where electricity is run by a public utility, including Sacramento and Los Angeles.

In addition, a local electricity agency could allow neighbors to set up "solar share" systems, in which a group of homes and businesses could go in together on a neighborhood solar energy system.

Many local companies already install solar panels and might branch out to the business of generating energy. But most of these companies are not unionized, noted Colin Miller of the Clean Energy and Jobs Campaign, which has been pushing for Community Choice.

At the June 3 Alameda County Board of Supervisors' meeting, Fred Pecker, president of Local 6 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Workers Union, urged the county, in setting up a Community Choice system, to "pay attention to labor standards and not allow what happened to recycling workers." As less of Alameda County's waste has gone into the landfill and more is now recycled, many good-paying jobs in the landfill have been eliminated, replaced by low-wage recycling jobs.

Supervisor Keith Carson agreed: "In hindsight," he said, "we could have done a better job with making those [recycling jobs] good jobs — inclusive, diverse, with training opportunities. I strongly urge, in the formation [of a Community Choice agency], that workforce development and inclusion are part of that."

Local clean energy advocates are also pushing for alternative economic models. "A local Community Choice agency could prioritize cooperatively owned energy development and local renewable energy projects with union labor," said Miller of the Clean Energy and Jobs Oakland Campaign. "This is our opportunity to create the kind of local energy system we want to see, with good, family-sustaining jobs and community power."

One organization, Energy Solidarity, is fostering the development of cooperatively owned and managed local energy systems. It's working with one Oakland high school, Emiliano Zapata Street Academy, not just to generate electricity but to educate. "Now we're working with students on an energy audit," said Dave Ron of Energy Solidarity. "We will be developing green skills, doing job training as we install the system."

Energy Solidarity is also working with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network to plan community-owned solar-energy projects in Richmond and Oakland. "In Richmond our members have been fighting against pollution and experiencing the health impacts," said APEN Campaign and Organizing Director Vivian Yi Huang. "We really want to support renewable energy to address the health and climate impacts" of fossil fuel, she said. But in addition, "we see community power, not just as electricity generation but as economic and political power. Who controls our energy? Who has a say in the ownership and governance of that energy?"

Alameda County's decision to go ahead with planning for Community Choice energy comes after years of advocacy by local community groups, including the Local Clean Energy Alliance, a coalition of ninety Bay Area environmental and clean energy organizations, the Oakland and Berkeley Climate Action Coalitions, and the Clean Energy and Jobs Oakland Campaign, which is made up of "organizations that work in poor communities and communities of color, social and economic justice organizations," according to Weinrub. The Sierra Club and some local unions have also been active in pushing for Community Choice energy.

County staffers estimated that it will take three years to get a Community Choice energy system up and running in Alameda County — that is, unless a bill currently in the California legislature derails it.

Last month, the state Assembly passed AB 2145, which supporters say would reform Community Choice energy. Opponents call the bill the "Monopoly Protection Act" and say it would make Community Choice energy impossible.

According to current law, local governments can make Community Choice energy agencies the default electricity provider, allowing individual customers to stay with PG&E if they want to. AB 2145 would make the current electric company — PG&E in Northern California — the default provider and require people who want Community Choice energy to sign up for it individually.

AB 2145 author, Assembly member Steven Bradford of Gardena, said he initiated the bill because local governments "shouldn't make the choice for the consumer." The bill would also require Community Choice energy agencies to tell potential customers the exact cost and the percentage of clean energy they would provide.

Weinrub of the Local Clean Energy Alliance said these conditions make Community Choice impossible. Local agencies can't buy energy for one household at a time, he argued. They need a large customer base to start negotiating contracts with energy producers. Until they have that customer base and negotiate those contracts, they have no way of knowing the exact price and energy mix they will be able to offer.

Weinrub and many other environmentalists suspect that electric utility companies wrote the bill. "That's the farthest thing from the truth," Bradford responded. "Utility companies have not graced my door."

A check of campaign donations listed by Project VoteSmart, however, shows that in 2012, PG&E gave Bradford \$7,800, making it his fifth largest contributor. PG&E supports AB 2145, according to state Assembly records. In addition, Bradford previously worked as public affairs director for Southern California Edison — PG&E's equivalent in Southern California.

Despite the lopsided Assembly vote in favor of AB 2145 — 51 to 15 — supporters of Community Choice energy say they are determined to keep fighting to stop the bill. AB 2145 opponents include Alameda County and the cities of Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond, as well as public agencies such as the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the California Public Utilities Commission, along with a host of environmental organizations. "The next showdown is June 23," Weinrub said, when the bill goes before the Senate Energy Committee. Supporters of Community Choice are planning a rally and a day of testimony in the committee hearing.

Community Development Director Bazar told the supervisors that if AB 2145 becomes law, "I suggest we come back to you," because if that happens, "it would be hard to make (Community Choice) work."

Community Choice supporters say the climate-change stakes are high. "We're only on this planet a few years unless we do something drastically different," said Weinrub.

Local clean energy projects also would not cost residents any more money, aside from modest start-up costs, because they would be supported by the fees customers are already paying for their electricity. And with local clean energy generation, "billions of dollars would stay in the county," rather than being paid out to utility investors, Weinrub said.