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ENERGY

Fairfax bans PG&E's SmartMeters for 6 months

August 06, 2010 | By David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Fairfax officials have slapped a six-month moratorium on the installation of Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s controversial SmartMeters, acting on concerns that the wireless devices collect sensitive personal information and could threaten public health.

Other towns and cities - including San Francisco - have asked state energy regulators to suspend SmartMeter installation across all of PG&E's service territory, which covers most of Central and Northern California.

But the Fairfax Town Council decided late Wednesday to push ahead with its own temporary ban, basing its authority on the town's right to control the installation of communications antennas within its borders. The wireless meters, which measure electricity and natural gas usage, feed their data to antennas that, in turn, relay the information to PG&E.

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While many critics have questioned the accuracy of the meters, Fairfax Mayor Lew Tremaine said the council was more focused on safety and privacy.

People who believe the electromagnetic radiation from wireless devices is a health hazard view the meters as a serious threat. Some PG&E customers have complained of debilitating headaches and nausea after the meters were installed on their homes. PG&E insists the meters are safe.

While the possible health effects of wireless devices such as cell phones and laptop computers remains in deep dispute, Fairfax officials want more information before allowing PG&E to continue installing SmartMeters in town.

"There's competing science on both sides of the argument, so it's very difficult to sort out," Tremaine said. "Fairfax's position here is that we should be following the precautionary principle. Unless we know no harm will be done, we shouldn't do it."

The council also wants more information on how data collected by the meters are used - and kept private. By measuring a home's electricity use hour by hour, the meters can show when residents wake up, go to work or leave on vacation - information that many people may not want others to see.

PG&E has already installed 200 SmartMeters in Fairfax, out of a planned total of 8,000. The utility, based in San Francisco, agreed before Wednesday's vote to temporarily suspend meter installation in Fairfax and hold at least one public meeting to address residents' concerns.

"We have found that, as customers learn more about the SmartMeter program and the benefits it can have with saving energy, the more excited they become about participating in it," PG&E spokesman Jeff Smith said.

Smith would not say, however, how long PG&E planned to delay installing meters in Fairfax or what will happen if the company wants to move ahead before the town council's moratorium expires.

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