

PG&E Reverses Field, Sets Sebastopol SmartMeter Forum



CRISTA JEREMIASON/ PD

A public forum was held regarding PG&E and SmartMeters put on by Sonoma County Supervisor Efen Carrillo held at Sebastopol Veterans Building, Wednesday, April 21, 2010. PG & E representatives did not show up for the panel.

By [BOB NORBERG](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Friday, April 23, 2010 at 9:09 a.m.

Last Modified: Friday, April 23, 2010 at 2:59 p.m.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co., having abruptly pulled out of a Sebastopol forum on the merits of its SmartMeters, has announced it will stage one of its own.

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The utility will conduct the public meeting from 5 to 10 p.m. Wednesday at the Veterans Hall in Sebastopol. April 28, 2010

The announcement on Friday came after PG&E was criticized by Sonoma County and Sebastopol officials for the utility company's last-minute decision to pull out of a public forum focusing on its controversial SmartMeters. The event Wednesday night drew about 300 people.

"I was not only disappointed, I was insulted," said Sonoma County Supervisor Efren Carrillo, who had organized the session. "We had planned this weeks ago. We had been working with PG&E staff to provide experts; they had been slated to be there."

The utility was to be present to address concerns of residents about the installation of the new energy monitoring meters. Some critics worry of potential health hazards from the devices, which employ wireless communication technology.

Spokesman Paul Moreno said the decision was made when it became apparent that the public was going to be allowed to speak directly to PG&E rather than just hand in questions on 3-by-5 inch cards.

"We learned the meeting format changed that we no longer felt we could have a meaningful dialogue," Moreno said Friday.

Moreno said the company will have tables set up and experts on hand to answer questions for anyone who shows up between 5 and 10 p.m.

Their withdrawal from last Wednesday's forum frustrated Sebastopol officials, who said they already were feeling powerless to compel PG&E to be responsive because the state Public Utilities Commission has approved the meter replacement program.

"There is nothing local we can do, we don't have legal standing other than to voice an opinion," said Councilwoman Kathleen Shaffer. "It's an unfortunate decision. You have to face your critics, no matter who you are."

Ninety minutes before the forum was supposed to start Wednesday night, PG&E notified Carrillo that it would not provide its experts for the panel nor staff members for information tables.

Carrillo had organized the meeting at the Sebastopol Veterans Hall for citizens to get information about the meters and discuss their concerns. He said he won't call for another hearing and Sebastopol city officials don't expect the issue to return to the City Council.

"It was a political calculation by PG&E not to show up," said Sebastopol Vice Mayor Guy Wilson said. **"They initially said they would be there and then they chickened out. I guess they felt that whatever negative reaction from not showing up was preferable to an even worse public response if they did show up."**

PG&E has begun replacing all 379,592 meters in Sonoma County with the SmartMeters, which use wireless technology to transmit the readings of electricity and gas use to a central location.

Moreno said 11 percent have been installed, but none in Sebastopol and other parts of west Sonoma County. The installation work will continue through next February.

The meters have been controversial in some parts of California where billing accuracy has been questioned, prompting the state Public Utilities Commission to order an independent investigation, but this is the first time safety issues have been raised, commission spokesman Andrew Kotch said.

In Sebastopol, there are a number of residents who are concerned that the meters emit radio waves that may be hazardous to their health. It is the same safety issue that residents have raised about cell towers and wireless Internet systems.

After two lengthy debates before the Sebastopol City Council, the council asked PG&E to defer putting the meters in until health and accuracy concerns could be investigated and discussed in a public meeting.

Wilson said he thinks PG&E missed an opportunity to address the issue on Thursday.

“Why not get the information out there and quell the anxiety of the public? It’s kind of a head-scratcher how they could be so stupid not to show up for the public forum,” Wilson said. End

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The Press Democrat March 9, 2010

Fear & Loathing in Sebastopol



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG/The Press Democrat

Jay Ma uses the free Wi-Fi at Coffee Catz in Sebastopol last week to work on his business, Living Mandala.

**By DEREK MOORE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT**

Published: Tuesday, March 9, 2010 at 3:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Tuesday, March 9, 2010 at 11:08 p.m.

When the Sebastopol City Council voted in February to ask PG&E to delay installing wireless natural gas and electric meters at homes and businesses, the decision was cheered by residents who packed council meetings to share concerns that such technology causes serious health problems, including cancer.

Related Links:

- [PG&E reverses field, sets Sebastopol SmartMeter forum](#)

Even for Sebastopol, where contrarian thinking is celebrated and has brought the city international attention, some of it unflattering, the claims being made about health risks related to the use of cell phones, wireless Internet and other technologies and the public policy decisions that are being made based on those concerns have sparked unusual acrimony.

"I hear it at the store. I hear it at the gym. I hear from a lot of people," said City Councilman Larry Robinson. "It ranges from amusement to disbelief."

The whole of Sonoma County is being drawn into the debate, with west county Supervisor Efren Carrillo planning a countywide public forum in April to discuss PG&E Co.'s SmartMeter program.

In a March 2 letter Carrillo sent to the state Public Utilities Commission, he asked for a delay in installing the meters in his district until issues can be aired, including a "candid discussion of potential health issues" related to use of the devices.

"Personally, I am a cell phone user. I'm a Wi-Fi user. I personally don't feel there are health concerns," Carrillo said. "But when constituents bring it to my attention, I think there's an opportunity to have a public dialogue."

Carrillo's request and that of the Sebastopol City Council are largely symbolic because they lack the authority to halt the new meters. **The PUC is hiring an independent auditor to test the new meters after complaints, mainly from PG&E customers in the Central Valley, that the devices may not be accurate. But the PUC has no plans as of now to slow meter installation.**

"There are millions of these meters installed around the globe with no complaints like the ones we are seeing from PG&E," PUC spokeswoman Terrie Prosper said. "We suspect the problem is not the hardware, but we won't know for sure until we do the assessment."

That audit won't focus on health concerns, but such concerns are the driving force locally for resistance to the devices.

Same group fought Wi-Fi

Carrillo's letter followed weeks of lobbying by the Sebastopol-based Electromagnetic Field Safety Network, the same group that successfully killed efforts to bring free wireless Internet to downtown Sebastopol in 2007 and more recently got SmartMeters on the city's agenda.

The network's influence belies their actual size — the group has only 12 or so members, said founder Sandi Maurer.

But Maurer said the "movement is growing...The numbers of people that are speaking out against this and working to educate the people through public policy is growing," she said.

The network's basic claim is that radio frequencies used to transmit data from SmartMeters, as well as to laptops, cell phones, TVs and other electronic devices, can cause “electrical sensitivity” and health problems ranging from chronic fatigue, headaches and insomnia, to heart ailments and cancer.

The network advocates “prudent avoidance” of the causes of “electrosmog,” as well as such things as a healthy diet built upon organic foods and using alternative medicines, such as acupuncture, to treat ailments.

Risks covered up

Maurer dismisses reports from the World Health Organization, American Cancer Society and other major health organizations that have found no definitive links between radio frequencies and ill health. In her opinion, the scientific community and corporations have vested financial interests in covering up the risks.

“Are we going to wait until the bodies start piling up around us?” she asked.

Maurer said she is a former ceramics maker who has devoted herself full time to the safety network the past three years. She lives in Sebastopol with her husband, 7-year-old daughter and her husband's 88-year-old mother.

Maurer said she relieved her own symptoms of chronic fatigue and other illnesses by re-wiring her home. She also forgoes using a cell phone or Wi-Fi and at night turns off the electricity to her house. Were it not for the needs of her mother-in-law she said she'd go off the grid entirely.

A history of questioning

Her concerns are well outside the mainstream in most areas of the country. But in Sebastopol, where residents have a rich history of challenging widely accepted scientific dogma, the network has found a receptive audience.

Sebastopol is the city, after all, where non-vaccination rates for children are among the highest in California out of concern that such inoculations are the cause of autism and other disorders despite overwhelming evidence of no such link.

Even Sebastopol residents strongly opposed to the safety network's cause say they appreciate living in a place where such debates are encouraged.

“I like the idea of people being allowed to entertain crackpot ideas in Sebastopol. I've lived in places where people don't, and I find that a very stifling experience,” said Robert Porter, a former Sonoma State University physics professor and Sebastopol resident who refers to members of the safety network as the “tin-foil-hat crowd.”

Seated outside Coffee Catz in Sebastopol this week, Tanja Soelkner tapped away on a Netbook linked to the coffee shop's wireless Internet service. With her was a cell phone. The German-born woman, who is living in Sebastopol on a tourist visa, said she is not worried about acquiring a serious illness as a result of her exposure to the Wi-Fi or cell phone transmissions.

But as a precaution, she carries an “electromagnetic harmonizer,” which looks like a playing card with a magnet stuck to the middle, and that, according to the manufacturer, is supposed to relieve symptoms of “electrostress.”

“That makes me feel better,” she said of the harmonizer. “I don't know if it works or not.”

Inside the cafe, Jay Ma said he relies heavily on wireless networks for his work as an event coordinator, which takes him all over the West Coast and to Hawaii. Despite his own belief that such technology is safe, he said he doesn't mind people raising doubts.

"I'm interested to learn more," he said.

Fueling fears

But critics of Maurer and the safety network say the group is fueling irrational fears to the detriment of Sebastopol.

The debate has gotten personal. On Facebook, the "Sandi Maurer Killed Free Wi-Fi in Sebastopol" group has 191 members. Maurer said she's received hate mail and she has grown weary of people taking her to task in the opinion pages of local newspapers.

Robinson, the councilman who supported bringing free wireless Internet downtown and supports the new gas and electric meters, has felt the wrath of those claiming health problems from electrosmog.

In turn, he minces no words in describing his critics as "the west county's equivalent of the Tea Party movement," which he said is gripped by an irrational mistrust of government, corporations and authority.

A former psychotherapist, Robinson said people who claim health problems related to radio frequencies are suffering psychosomatic illnesses — which is basically another way of saying he thinks it's all in their heads. "I don't want to diminish their suffering because I know it's legitimate and real," he said. "But attributing that suffering to electrosensitivity or chemical trails is fallacious thinking."

A 2005 World Health Organization study stated people who claim to be suffering from health problems related to electromagnetic fields may have "pre-existing psychiatric conditions as well as stress reactions as a result of worrying about EMF health effects, rather than the EMF exposure itself." But Maurer bristled at suggestions that her health problems are psychological in nature. "They're looking for a stereotype," she said. "I read that and I know in time the truth is going to come out about all of this, just like it did about cigarettes."

Robinson criticized his fellow council members for what he views as public policy being driven by unfounded claims, calling it a "disservice to the people who are suffering from the psychosomatic illness, as well as for the larger community."

Mayor Sarah Gurney, Vice Mayor Guy Wilson and Councilwoman Kathleen Shaffer voted to send the letter to the PUC seeking the SmartMeter delay. Councilwoman Linda Kelley was absent from that meeting but in 2007 opposed bringing free Wi-Fi to town.

Gurney noted her concerns about the new meters go beyond health issues to also include concerns about the accuracy of the devices, the loss of meter reader jobs and privacy issues.

Wilson, an attorney, said he does not believe city leaders are catering to a minority at the expense of what others in Sebastopol might want, saying he mostly hears from people who have health concerns about wireless Internet and other technologies. "I don't think we can decide things on what the perceived majority is. If there is a minority, even a small minority, suffering from a technology, I'm not willing to dismiss that concern," he said.

Need to prove it's safe

He said the onus is on people who support such technology to prove that it is safe.

“Maybe those concerns will be proven unfounded. Or maybe not,” he said. “I don't think we have definitive scientific information to say there are no health risks from exposure to Wi-Fi or EMF.”

But critics say city leaders and safety network members are seeking an impossible standard, wanting absolute assurances about technologies that even if proven to be detrimental to some people, provide benefits to a vast many more.

“It's a good idea to study all of this stuff. It's relatively new,” said Dale Dougherty, general manager of the Maker Media division of O'Reilly Media in Sebastopol. “But that doesn't mean it should be banned until we have a body of evidence that it's safe. I think our practice has been that unless we see real evidence it's causing harm, we move along.”

Research into electromagnetic fields has been ongoing since the 1950s, with much of the attention recently focused on cell phones.

A story in the March edition of Popular Science said that unlike cigarettes, which have been proven to cause disease, there is yet “no proven mechanism by which cell phones do the same.”

The report stated most studies have found no link between cell phone use and cancer, although a few have, including a Swedish study that found increased risk for malignant tumors after 10 years of regular cell phone use. A 2004 government report also found the rate of childhood brain and spinal-cord tumors in Britain rose from just less than 20 per million in the early 1970s to just less than 30 per million in the late 1990s, prompting calls for awareness campaigns urging decreased cell phone use among children and adolescents.

The Popular Science report said research is continuing to determine whether there is something, as yet undiscovered, in these phones, or in electromagnetic fields in general, that should be cause for worry.

Some communities are sounding the alarm. State Sen. Mark Leno, a San Francisco Democrat whose district includes southern Sonoma County, has introduced legislation that would require information about radiation levels on cell phone packaging. In Maine, legislators are debating whether cell phones sold there should display warnings about brain cancer.

Sebastopol's stance on free wireless Internet downtown and on SmartMeters takes the concerns to a new — some say, hysterical — level. Jeff Mich, an Analy High School senior who gathered 1,700 signatures in 2007 in a losing effort to have the free wireless Internet installed, said he remains disappointed in city leaders.

“I don't want my town to be known for choosing unsubstantiated claims over science and reason,” said Mich, who hopes for a career in computer engineering.

Emit less than microwaves

Research funded by PG&E found SmartMeters emit less radio frequencies than many other electronic devices, including cell phones and microwave ovens.

PG&E has begun rolling out the new meters in Santa Rosa and other North Coast cities and had planned to start work last month on converting 22,572 electric and gas meters in the Sebastopol area to the upgraded devices. But that has been pushed back for an undetermined amount of time for reasons unrelated to the city's request for a delay, PG&E spokesman Paul Moreno said.

He said the company routinely adjusts schedules as the need arises, and that it's only a matter of time before every meter in Sebastopol will be upgraded. “There is no opt out,” he said. “Every meter is going to be upgraded to a SmartMeter meter because they will no longer be manually read.” End

