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GOVERNMENT

San Anselmo considers the benefits of Smart Meters

Bucking recent trends, San Anselmo decides to wait and see.

By **Kelly Dunleavy** July 30, 2010

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Following an hour and a half presentation by PG&E, the San Anselmo Town Council decided to adopt a wait-and-see approach towards the PG&E Smart Meter program.

The council's decision was at odds with a recent trends asking for a moratorium on installing the wireless meters. The Marin County Supervisors recently called for a moratorium and [Fairfax went a step further to draft an ordinance banning the meters from town \(/articles/fairfax-doesnt-want-to-get-smart\)](#).

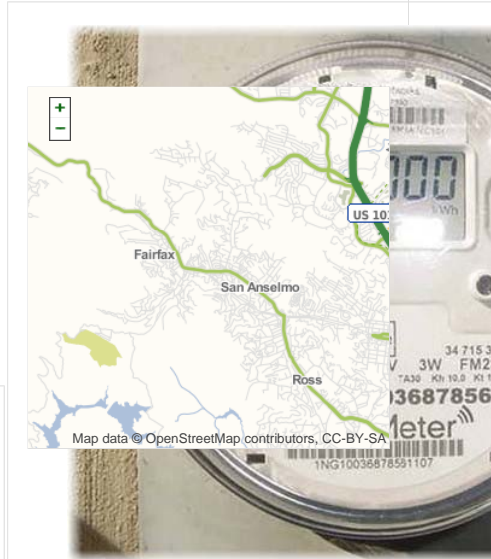
But, San Anselmo chose to stop and consider the benefits of the meters.

"If questions are raised is that enough for us to get involved as a town," said [Councilmember Tom McInerney \(/local_facts/san-anselmo-council-member-tom-mcinerney\)](#).

"There's been a lot of misinformation," said PG&E representative Andrew Tang.

[Get the basic facts about the Smart Meter program here. \(/articles/the-ins-and-outs-of-pges-smart-meter-program\)](#)

PG&E is spending \$2.2 billion to install 10 million Smart meters in California by 2012. Installation began in Marin in July and will finish by spring 2011.



Tang explained that the wireless meters, which will replace current electricity and gas meters, are the first step in implementing a smart grid. Smart grids can allow utilities to better manage energy use by implementing programs that encourage people to use energy at cheaper rates during off-peak hours.

Tang also pointed out that the current grid hasn't been updated since the 1950s. Currently, there is no way for PG&E to know if there is an outage until people call and let them know. But Smart meters would change that.

"This is 2010, not 1910," said Tang.

The wireless meters would use a combination of cellular and radio networks to send an individual's usage data back to PG&E. [Find out how Smart meters work here. \(/articles/how-smart-meters-work\)](#)

That hourly data would also be available for individuals to view by logging into their online account with PG&E. Currently, individuals are charged more for the more energy they use to encourage less energy consumption. However, because right now users are only able to see how much they used after the fact, the higher prices don't operate as a carrot or a stick, but as "a baseball bat," Tang said.

By installing Smart meters, he said, customers are given more information to help them make informed choices about their energy consumption, PG&E is given more information to help deal with problems and outages quickly, and the groundwork is laid for a future smart grid. Tang compared the future to making your house like the Jetson's with intelligent fridges that know when to use more energy and when to use less, small magnets that can tell you how much electricity you're using in your house, and devices (like those that are currently being developed by Cisco) that will tell you how much energy all the appliances in your house are using.

"We have to change our relationship with energy," said Tang. Tang detailed a number of stories where PG&E representatives went out to speak with customers who believed they were having problems with their Smart meters, but in fact the customers failed to understand just how much electricity they were using.

In one example, a woman bemoaned the fact that she had bought a new energy-efficient fridge but seen no reduction in her bill. It turned out she still had the old fridge in the garage as a freezer. Another customer, he said, was proud of a new hot tub he had installed, but insisted the hot tub only used water not electricity.

Tang also addressed a number of issues that have been raised about the meters, including privacy concerns, health problems, and claims of inaccuracy, saying that the problems have been overplayed in the media.

The meters, themselves, far exceed FCC standards for wireless devices, said Tang. The meter, he said, is the equivalent of "a person standing outside your house making many very short cell phone calls a day that total 45 seconds," said Tang.

The meters have also resulted in only .16 percent of bills needing to be estimated because of accuracy problems. Standards meters result on 1.34 percent of bills having to be estimated.

Largely prompted by concerns about accuracy, the California Public Utility Commission commissioned an independent review of the meters by The Structure Group. That review is expected to be completed by Aug. 15.

Because the completion of the review is so close, the council decided it wasn't worth asking for a moratorium. Despite nearly every person who spoke asking the council to stop the meters from being installed, the council chose to wait and see what the review said.

Councilmember Jeff Kroot (/local_facts/san-anselmo-council-member-jeff-kroot) was the only councilmember present who wanted to ask for a moratorium. Councilmember Ford Greene (/local_facts/san-anselmo-vice-mayor-ford-greene) was absent.

"I may be the only person here who has taken college physics," Kroot joked about trying to understand the effects of electro-magnetic frequencies. "But I did take enough math to know what \$2.2 billion is and we're going to have to pay."

A number of residents were very upset about the decision.

"We don't have a choice as consumers. We cannot opt out. This technology is going into our houses whether we like it or not," said Judi Shils.

Do you think the San Anselmo Town Council did the right thing? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

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