

THE MORNING AFTER

SPECIAL EDITION

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Ross to Join Marin Energy Authority

At a special Council meeting last night, the Ross Town Council unanimously voted to join the Marin Energy Authority and offer Marin Clean Energy to Ross residents and businesses, who will be enrolled in the program in July 2012. Ross ratepayers will have an opportunity to opt out of the program prior to their enrollment date, but if they fail to do so, they will automatically be switched from PG&E to Marin Clean Energy for their electricity generation.

“This is about being a responsible citizen in the world, in the county, and in the Town,” said Council member Chris Martin. “Glaciers are retreating, sea levels are rising and weather patterns are changing, and we know this is happening because of greenhouse gas emissions. We have to make decisions that will protect the environment, and this is one.”

The Marin Energy Authority (MEA) provides two electricity choices for customers – a Light Green option that contains a minimum 27% state-certified renewable energy content, and a Deep Green option that contains 100% certified renewable energy content. In total, MEA’s greenhouse gas free content is 74%. In contrast, PG&E’s electricity comes from 16% state-certified renewable sources and is 57% greenhouse gas free. State-certified renewable sources include solar, wind, bio-mass and small hydroelectricity generation. Large hydroelectric and nuclear sources do not emit greenhouse gasses, but are not considered by the State of California to count toward state renewable content mandates.



Ross customers will be provided with four opportunities to opt-out of the Marin Clean Energy program without penalty: twice within sixty days prior to enrollment and twice within the first two months of service. Notices will be sent in the mail to all Ross residents and businesses. Even if a customer chooses MEA, he may return to PG&E bundled service at any time after paying a small fee.

Although MEA may be responsible for procuring the electricity supply, PG&E will continue to deliver the electricity through its transmission and distribution system and provide meter reading, billing, and maintenance services.

While Marin Clean Energy has more greenhouse gas-free content, it currently costs more than PG&E generated electricity. Staff presented residential rate comparisons that showed a 1,000 kilowatt hour per month customer currently pays \$130.36 as an MEA Light Green customer and \$93.98 as a PG&E customer. Due to price tiering, the cost difference increases as the monthly electricity usage increases. The average Ross resident, who uses 1,234 kilowatts per month, would currently pay \$57.45 more per month for Light Green electricity. Deep Green electricity adds another one cent per kilowatt on to that bill, or about \$12 per month for the average Ross resident.

Electricity rates and fees change, and the Council acknowledged that the MEA/PG&E price comparison may be very different in July when Ross ratepayers will be enrolled in Marin Clean Energy. For that

reason, Mayor Carla Small suggested updating the rate comparison after MEA sets its rates in April, and presenting that information to the public during a regular Council meeting or a special Council meeting in May. “We have a very smart group of residents, and we’ve improved our communications over the past few years. We will do our best to make sure residents are educated and have the information they need to make the right choice for them.”

While all Council members supported providing Ross residents and businesses with a choice in electricity providers, most expressed concerns with the opt-out provision, which is required under California State Assembly Bill 117.

“I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders tonight,” said Mayor Pro Tempore Rupert Russell. “When I ran for the Town Council a year ago, I said I was for choice and was in favor of joining MEA. But I am unhappy with the opt-out provision, which frankly seems un-American. Unfortunately, this is the system that has been designed, and if we want to give people a choice, we have to do it this way.”

Council member Scot Hunter said he felt MEA was a noble cause, but that he had several concerns about cost control and the MEA board of directors, which has a voting record that shows only a few instances of dissent. He cautioned MEA to watch expenses, salaries, pensions and benefits, and requested that the future Ross representative on the MEA board address these issues.

Council members Hunter and Strauss also took MEA to task for providing misleading information. In one instance, MEA reported they reduced rates by 14%, but failed to mention they had stopped reimbursing a PG&E cost recovery fee, which essentially offset the fee reduction. In another, MEA reported they had paid off original loans, but did not mention they had taken out new loans. “When you don’t tell it exactly the way it is, you do yourself a disfavor,” said Council member Hunter.

The Council directed staff to prepare the necessary resolution and ordinance to join the Marin Energy Authority and bring these items to Council for action.

Council Discusses Fire Department Consolidation

The Council discussed expanding shared fire services with the Ross Valley Fire Department, as well as fire department consolidation with the Kentfield Fire Protection District, but asked for more information before moving in any particular direction.

Under both scenarios, the Ross Fire Station would remain open with current staffing levels. The Kentfield option appeared to be less advantageous. An initial analysis showed it would cost \$93,500 over current Ross costs to pay salary and benefits for the six existing firefighter positions. Administrative costs would be in addition to that amount. The study also determined that consolidation would require a new governance structure and 50% of Ross property taxes to permanently shift to the new fire protection district. Despite this additional cost, Kentfield does not currently have a dedicated fire inspector or a battalion chief available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

According to Fire Chief Tom Vallee, a merger with the Ross Valley Fire Department (RVFD) would result in some cost savings and improve the level of fire services for Ross.

RVFD currently provides fire protection services for three communities – San Anselmo, Sleepy Hollow and Fairfax. Each community has its own fire station, but the Fire Chief, Battalion Chief, Fire Inspector and Administrative Assistant work out of the San Anselmo Station. Under consolidation, Ross would maintain existing staffing levels at the Ross Fire Station. The apprentice



firefighter program would remain and 3-person engine staffing would not be affected. The Ross Valley Paramedics would also stay in Ross.

The Ross Fire Station could be housed within existing remodeled space, rather than in a new, expanded facility. Last year, the Town estimated that a new public safety building with expanded office space would cost approximately \$10 million. A remodeled building would cost substantially less, and could be eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funding.

The Town would also save money through reduced overhead costs, overtime, and elimination of Social Security contributions. All administrative work, including accounting, payroll processing, and human resources, would move to RVFD. Fire inspections and plan check would be coordinated through RVFD.

Ross currently contracts for RVFD's Battalion Chief services. Chief Vallee said both agencies constantly train together and provide routine backup. A merged department would reduce duplication of effort in administration of programs, provide advancement opportunities for Ross fire personnel, and improve response. Ten fire personnel would be on-duty each day, and more off-duty personnel would be available in the case of a disaster.

If the Council chose to move forward with RVFD, the Town would sign a joint powers agreement. Ross would be a full voting member, and two Ross Council members would sit on the RVFD board. The Town's predetermined cost share would be based on the cost of current staffing levels in Ross, plus a share of the cost for administration, battalion chiefs, and the fire inspector.

The Council was in support of continuing discussions with both Kentfield and RVFD, and asked Chief Vallee to return with some hard numbers on expenses and cost savings for both options. Looking out at an audience filled only with public safety personnel, Mayor Carla Small expressed concern that no Ross residents had stayed to discuss the agenda item. The Council asked Chief Vallee to reach out to the community and consider forming a citizens group at some point in the future to get the word out.

The Morning After is published following each regular Council meeting by the Town of Ross and is written by Project Planner Christine O'Rourke with support from Administrative Manager Linda Lopez, and reviewed by the Ross Mayor prior to publication. The newsletter is not an official record of the meeting's proceedings and does not cover all agenda items. No portion of this newsletter may be copied, reproduced or reprinted without advance written permission from the Town of Ross.