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Dog Bites
Charged Atmosphere

By Jeremy Mullman

If there was one thing the ongoing battle over whether to build a new power plant in southeast San Francisco didn't need, it was more combustible figures in its mix.

After all, the public workshops and hearings on expanding the Potrero Hill plant have already been marked by high-pitched accusations and tantrums from environmentalists, residents, and oversensitive, underprepared California Energy Commission staffers, which led, on Aug. 2, to a largely ignored plea for civility from Supervisor Sophie Maxwell.

So the last thing the process needed was the presence of a state energy commissioner whose picture had been on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle less than two weeks earlier in connection with a story about how his investment portfolio included as much as \$510,000 worth of stock in 14 energy companies, including some firms whose California projects he had voted on.

When that commissioner, William Keese, showed up at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House on Aug. 13 to preside over what could have been a relatively tame meeting on process logistics, few were surprised to see the gathering grow as agitated as ever. The California Energy Commission even had arranged for a pair of California Highway Patrol troopers to be on Guard.

The CHP and Keese had it easy at first. The typical venom was flowing from residents and environmentalists, sure, but aside from a few subtle jabs (one activist urged commissioners to "take a look at ourselves, our consciences, and our stock holdings," which caused the rotund, balding Keese to turn beet red) things were fairly calm. But then Barbara George, 54 and gray-haired, ambled to the podium. She began to rant almost immediately, first needling Keese, who had told the Chronicle that he wasn't aware of which stocks he owned.

"I want to know if you've written a letter to your broker to complain that you thought you had mutual funds but you had energy stocks," she said. "If you can't keep track of your money, how are you gonna keep track of ours?"

As George's speech went on, she hammered away at Keese over increasingly loud objections from fellow energy commissioner Steve Pernell, who had been trying -- with a comical lack of success -- to quell various episodes of applause and ire all meeting long. As George continued to drown Pernell out, the CHP officers waded in, eventually scooping George up by her arms and dragging her out the door as she screamed her now-familiar refrain: "If you don't know about \$500,000 of your own money, how are you going to keep track of ours?"

Watching the episode from a center podium, Keese -- beet red again -- appeared ready to say something, but he apparently reconsidered, instead choosing simply to watch as George was carted off by the troopers.

After the meeting, however, George was back inside, joking around with one of the troopers who had bounced her. It turns out the trooper had carted her out of other energy-related meetings, and realizing she was relatively harmless, didn't mind readmitting her.

That gave her a chance to chat, briefly, with Keese.

"He said the story was wrong, and that he has \$800,000 in mutual funds and only \$5,000 in energy stocks," George said, shrugging when asked how the sum of holdings in 14 energy companies could be so meager. "Oh, I don't believe him at all, but it is interesting that he has a story." -- Jeremy Mullman

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