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Green power gets early nod from Fairfax Council

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A proposal to launch a countywide power authority that would allow Marin residents to purchase their power from "greener" energy producers than Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has received a vote of confidence from the Fairfax Town Council.

After listening to a presentation by a group of local residents promoting the idea, the five-member board voted unanimously Wednesday to back the idea.

"It was a very enthusiastic yes," said Fairfax Mayor Mary Ann Maggiore.

The vote is the first shot in what promises to be a bitter battle between supporters of "community choice" and PG&E. Between now and November, Marin city councils and the Board of Supervisors are expected to vote on whether to join Marin Clean Energy, a joint powers authority that would buy renewable energy for local customers.

If a county or city council joins such an authority, residents and businesses would have the option of buying their electricity directly from the authority. They may also choose to remain with PG&E.

Hearings on the proposal have already been conducted in Mill Valley, San Anselmo, Corte Madera, Sausalito and Tiburon, and more are planned.

Last month, PG&E agreed to change its marketing tactics after the San Joaquin Valley Power Authority filed a complaint with the California Public Utilities Commission. The authority said the way PG&E financed its marketing tactics broke state rules, a claim the utility denied.

A state law passed in 2002 - after the rolling electricity blackouts of 2000 and 2001 - gave local governments the right to purchase electricity for power users in their communities wherever they choose. The San Joaquin Valley Power Authority was the first community-based agency formed under the law. The authority claimed PG&E was using revenue from ratepayers to oppose the move, which the utility is prohibited from doing.

David Rubin, PG&E's director of service analysis, said, "We have always charged these activities in what is called a below-the-line account, so it has never included ratepayer funding."

Individuals who decide to purchase their power from the authority will have the option of going "light green" or "dark green," said Dawn Weisz, sustainability planner for the Marin Community Development Agency. Weisz presented the Marin Clean Energy proposal to the Fairfax council Wednesday night.

Light green customers would get 25 percent to 50 percent of their energy from renewable sources and would pay about the same amount for their energy as they do now with PG&E, Weisz said. The energy that dark green customers receive would be 100 percent renewable and would come at an 8 percent to 10 percent premium, she said. In both cases, ratepayers would be paying less than they would if they stayed with PG&E after the authority has been in operation eight to 10 years, Weisz said.

"We don't agree," Rubin said. "We think they have significantly underestimated the cost of providing power."

Rubin estimates that during the first three years ratepayers who buy their electricity from the green authority would pay 20 percent to 25 percent more than if they had remained with PG&E. The utility currently gets 14 percent of its power from renewable sources, Rubin said.

In any case, Maggiore says ratepayers who purchase through the authority would reduce their ozone emissions by 20 percent - "and that says a lot to us."

The vote by the Fairfax council Wednesday was merely a demonstration of solidarity. The council will hear from PG&E on June 4 before taking final action, Maggiore said. The ordinance that local governments will vote on is being tweaked by lawyers and won't be ready for another two to three weeks, Weisz said.

Cost is just one part of the equation, Maggiore said.

"This is both a moral and fiscal decision," she said. "It's unconscionable that we should still be using coal and nuclear power to operate our air conditioners."