

Ross backs out of Marin Energy Authority

Brent Ainsworth, 01/13/2010

Ross this week became the only Marin County municipality to reverse field and back out of the Marin Energy Authority, which plans to provide electric power from sustainable sources to county ratepayers by this summer.

In front of a full Town Hall on Tuesday night, Councilman Scot Hunter was the swing vote in a 3-2 decision to opt out of the new joint powers authority, which received an initial commitment from the town last year.

The authority can proceed with its plan to provide a green alternative to Pacific Gas and Electric Co. because of its support from most of Marin's municipalities. Novato, Corte Madera and Larkspur had earlier elected not to join.

Also on Tuesday night, the Sausalito City Council voted 3-2 to continue its participation in the energy authority. Mayor Jonathan Leone joined council members Herb Weiner and Mike Kelly in voting to keep the city in, while Councilwomen Linda Pfeifer and Carolyn Ford voted to bow out.

"Everything is still on track," said Dawn Weisz, the authority's interim director. "Ross accounts for a small energy load - the smallest in the county except for Belvedere - so their withdrawal does not have an impact on our modeling.

"The result (of the vote) means that energy customers in Ross will not have a choice of providers. I was surprised because I know there are numerous residents and businesses in Ross who were urging the council to provide them with that choice."

Hunter was joined by Mayor Richard Strauss and Michael Skall in favor of backing out. Bill Cahill and Chris Martin voted to stay in.

Hunter had been in favor of the energy authority when Ross first voted to participate last year. He said part of the reason he switched was because of a scathing Marin County Civil Grand Jury report on the topic and an unconvincing rebuttal by the authority.

"I spent a lot of time on that report and the rebuttal, and I think the report was a first-rate piece of work," he said.

He said he is pleased with PG&E's efforts to provide emissions-free power if nuclear and hydroelectric sources are included in the mix. Hunter added that he was concerned about rising start-up costs for the agency, the challenges of creating a new bureaucracy and the hope in the long run to opt back in if the Marin Energy Authority gets solidly established.

"I could see no harm at all in Ross saying we'll stand down for now and see what happens," he said. "It's very hard to believe this utility would refuse our customers at some point in the future."

Martin, who had been the town's representative on the Marin Energy Authority board of directors, called the Town Council vote "regrettable."

"There may be a time when the town can re-establish itself in the MEA, but it may come at a cost," he said. "I have a lot of faith with the JPAs in Marin and the government in Marin, and this was about local control. I see big advantages to having decisions made at the local level rather than fighting lobbyists and politicians in Sacramento."

Town Manager Gary Broad said of the 12 Ross residents who spoke up at Tuesday's meeting, eight or nine urged the council to opt out of the energy authority. He said the out-of-town advocates were half for and half against Ross joining the authority.

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