

Save Lafayette Trees: a Call to Action

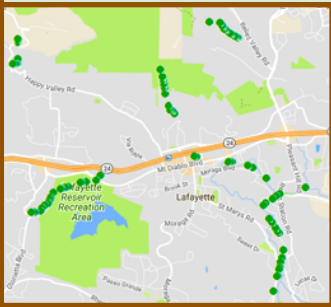
by Kent Fickett, VP MDAS

In March, without any formal public announcement, and behind closed doors, the Lafayette City Council, responding to a PG&E request to clear the area around their large natural gas pipeline, signed a Tree Cutting Agreement that gave PG&E permission to cut down 272 oaks and other mature trees along the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail, the Lafayette Reservoir Rim Trail, downtown, and on private property—many of them heritage oaks and redwoods—in exchange for a “mitigation” payment to the city of Lafayette amounting to \$530,000.

Lafayette has an existing Tree Ordinance that prevents the cutting of trees of a certain size or species, but PG&E claimed it was exempt from local ordinances. The city chose to ignore the ordinance in exchange for the “mitigation” payment. More importantly, the city of Lafayette and PG&E did not comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to review environmentally, less-impacting alternatives.

When local citizens, including Mount Diablo Audubon members and the MDAS Board, heard about this agreement, they pressed the City Council at subsequent meetings to reverse the agreement and to look at alternatives under CEQA. After repeated attempts to urge the City Council to rescind their action, a group of local citizens formed “Save Lafayette Trees” to try and protect as many trees as possible.

Michael Dawson, President of Save Lafayette Trees, stated, “Not only did the city of Lafayette fail to notify residents of the plans to circumvent their own tree protection ordinances, both the city and PG&E bypassed very important environmental review regulations, including CEQA. These regulations are designed specifically to protect our neighborhoods and parks from expedited projects.” (L: see



an enlarged tree map of the 272 trees to be cut on savelafayettetrees.org under “Important Links”)

In addition, Save Lafayette Trees says that PG&E’s claims of imminent danger posed by tree roots, the rationale behind cutting down the trees, are baseless, even by their own documentation. According to Save Lafayette Trees, tree roots have never caused a pipeline explosion in California and roots don’t corrode pipes. Trees and pipes have coexisted for decades, and tree roots may help stabilize slopes.

Save Lafayette Trees contends that, instead, PG&E should install remote shut-off valves and replace aging (60-70 years old) pipelines to help protect trees and enable modern pipeline inspections. They suggest that PG&E wants to cut trees for cost-efficient aerial monitoring, versus for valid public safety concerns, prioritizing profit over environment.



Other cities, including Santa Cruz, Palo Alto, and Danville were successful in rejecting PG&E efforts to cut down trees in their communities.

On June 28, after repeated attempts to encourage the city of Lafayette to revisit the PG&E agreement failed, Save Lafayette Trees filed a law suit in Contra Costa Superior Court against the city of Lafayette and PG&E demanding the immediate reversal of the March 27 Tree Cutting Agreement.

In July, the MDAS Board voted to make two contributions to Save Lafayette Trees to help with legal costs, a \$1,000 outright donation, and a second \$4,000 matching-fund donation that the organization reached through local fund-raisers and donations.

Save Lafayette Trees held settlement meetings in August with PG&E and the city of Lafayette. Presently, tree cutting work has stopped until the matter can be heard in the

Contra Costa Superior Court starting November 8.

Additionally, in the course of making the legal challenge, Save Lafayette Trees discovered that based upon a similar East Bay Regional Parks (EBRPD) agreement, PG&E might be allowed to cut down 200 trees in nearby Briones Regional Park.

Trees, including heritage oaks, a keystone species, provide natural beauty and shade, reduce the effects of pollution, and are an important habitat for birds insects, invertebrates, fungi, and mammals. As birders and nature lovers, it is critical to share your concerns to be sure your voice is heard.

To learn more: savelafayettetrees.org

Call to Action:

If you are a Lafayette resident, contact your City Council members about the PG&E Agreement (because of conflict issues only three Council members can vote on this matter). If you are concerned about the trees in Briones RP or along EBMUD rights-of-ways, email your Director to voice your concerns about Tree Cutting Agreements made without CEQA environmental impact reviews or public hearings.

Lafayette: cityhall@lovelafayette.org or (925) 284-1968
Mayor Mike Anderson

Council Members Cameron Burks and Mark Mitchell

East Bay Regional Park District:

Dee Rosario drosario@ebparks.org

East Bay Municipal Utility District:

John A. Coleman, john.coleman@ebmud.com

Marguerite Young, marguerite.young@ebmud.com



The widely viewed and photographed Screech Owl on the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Trail, Maren Smith photo