



Commentary

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Messages to the new board, part five: Let's get energized

BY THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE SIERRA CLUB SANTA LUCIA CHAPTER

Editor's note: This is the fifth of five monthly Sierra Club commentaries devoted to policy recommendations for the incoming County Board of Supervisors.

When the United States failed to sign the Kyoto Protocol pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, U.S. cities and counties stepped up to the plate. The success of the Sierra Club's Cool Cities campaign is one example of the ongoing energy transformation of the nation: More than 800 city governments across the country (including SLO, Morro Bay, and Atascadero) have signed the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, committing to monitor and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to Kyoto levels.

Local solutions to the global problem must be implemented, even with a new, environmentally sane administration in Washington. Buy locally, eat locally, and plug into local green power.

California has an edge. Here's how to use it: The County Board of Supervisors should work hard to implement Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) in San Luis Obispo. This, Honorable Supervisors, is a state law that will help you create incentives toward emission reductions; the widespread use of clean, renewable energy; a revitalized local economy; and improved public health.

Some recent California laws supporting alternative energy and greenhouse gas reduction are the equivalent of wrenches and screwdrivers that will be handy in setting about constructing our local energy future. Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) is not a tool in a toolbox; it's the all-in-one workbench—skillsaw, lathe, vise, clamps, drilling jig, disk sander—that you need at the center of your policy workshop.

Community Choice Aggregation allows California municipalities to pool their buying power and increase the amount of renewable energy we use. It means local control over electric rates by taking rate-setting out of the hands of private utilities, answerable to their investors, and putting it in the hands of local agencies that are answerable to customers. It can mean rates up to 20 percent less than what the investor-owned utilities charge. Above all, it establishes a market for the generation of clean, green power.

California communities are seeking to implement Community Choice Aggregation in ways that will significantly exceed the goals of California's Renewables Portfolio Standard. San Francisco plans to realize 360 megawatts from energy efficiency, solar and wind energy, and small-scale renewables by 2012, revving up its CCA program with innovative "H Bonds," to be repaid based on revenues from monthly electric bills. Marin County is aiming for 100 percent renewable power. Allowing customers to generate their own power (with local solar arrays, small wind turbines, and fuel cells) would substantially contribute to a statewide reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions.

Certainly, every CCA established means power ceded by the state's giant private utilities to another entity, and the utilities are not shy about protecting their turf. PG&E has aggressively opposed CCA implementation by San Francisco, Marin, and the San Joaquin Valley Power Authority (prompting a settlement at the Public Utilities Commission requiring PG&E to revise and disclose its marketing conduct), and has already spoken against Community Choice in San Luis Obispo in local government forums. It can be expected that PG&E will mount a full-scale public relations campaign against CCA here when an implementation plan is underway. The utility's tactics—warn customers that fees to leave the utility will be high, that the savings on monthly bills will be low, that the utility is undertaking energy conservation programs so there is no need for a CCA— will be deployed to persuade residential and business customers to "opt out" of Community Choice and undermine implementation.

PG&E's ground offensive here will be intense, and the county must be prepared to counter those efforts with the facts about CCA, enlisting the aid of local social and environmental nonprofits to help disseminate information on CCA to ratepayers. Those alliances should be made soon, as PG&E will move to co-opt those organizations in advance of CCA implementation.

A feasibility study for a regional Community Choice plan is coming up for a vote soon at the SLO Council of Governments. That meeting will be the time for all concerned to acknowledge that there is no higher local funding or staffing priority than ensuring that this study gets funded and staff time is allocated.

There will be push-back. There will be attempts to defer and deflect. Honorable Supervisors, you will need to cut through that noise and fully grasp the opportunities and the solution at hand, the one that has a chance of matching the size of the problem. We are in urgent need of a renewable and sustainable future, it needs to start right now, and it's spelled "CCA." For more information, go to lgc.org/cca/. Δ

The Santa Lucia Chapter represents the Sierra Club's 2,500 members in San Luis Obispo County. The Executive Committee includes Karen Merriam, Steven Marx, Jack Morrow, Melody DeMeritt, Linda Seeley, Cal French, and Mark Shefrin.