

Contra Costa explores its own renewable energy program

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MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa County moved a step closer Tuesday to creating or joining a partnership that would provide residents with a choice for clean energy.

Supervisors voted to begin an outreach program with cities in the county to gauge interest in creating a renewable energy collaboration that would compete with Pacific Gas & Electric. The county will pay \$25,000 for a consultant to visit cities and determine whether they would like to create their own program, partner with Alameda County or join an existing one, such as Marin Clean Energy.

"Certainly on its face it sounds like it makes a lot of sense," Supervisor Candace Andersen said during Tuesday's board meeting. The county plans to spend the next four months reaching out to its cities.

Already, three Contra Costa cities -- Richmond, San Pablo and El Cerrito -- have joined the Marin Clean Energy program. Supervisor John Gioia, who lives in Richmond, said he's a customer of that energy option and says his bill is cheaper than what PG&E offers. The program uses 50 percent clean energy, compared to 30 percent from the region's main power company.

The county began looking into the alternatives in response to Senate Bill 350, which requires the state to obtain 50 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030. Supervisors expressed hope that there might also be opportunities in the county to create their own green energy sources.

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"Not only would we be helping with climate change and the environment, but this also would create more jobs in our community," said Supervisor Karen Mitchoff.

Walnut Creek and Lafayette have expressed interest in creating a partnership with the county.

There would be startup costs of about \$1.5 million if the county created its own energy partnership. Those costs would be paid off through sales of the energy. That option would allow the county to maintain more local governmental control, officials said. Joining Marin or Sonoma's collectives would avoid the startup costs, but the county would lose some control, including a say on setting prices.

Alameda County is also studying the issue, and Contra Costa County supervisors said it's possible the two counties could collaborate on an energy partnership.

If there is enough interest in an alternative to PG&E, the county and other entities would invest in a feasibility study. Any plan would require approval by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Even if the agreement was reached, customers would still have the option to stick with PG&E for their electricity.

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