

Local News

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County studies new fees

\$3 to \$40 per home to buy street lights

By Steve Taylor
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REDWOOD CITY — Property owners in 11 unincorporated areas of San Mateo County may be forced to pay special fees to help the county government purchase 2,400 street lights from Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

The one-time assessments could range from \$3 to \$40 for owners of single-family homes, Public Works Director Robert Sans said Thursday.

Sans will ask the Board of Supervisors Tuesday to take steps that could lead to the assessments. Up for approval are an agreement to buy the lights and authorization for Sans to seek a state loan to install in the lamps energy-efficient bulbs.

Areas that could be affected include unincorporated areas around Redwood City and Menlo Park, most of East Palo Alto, La Honda, Belmont's harbor-industrial area and the Emerald Lake Hills area above Redwood City.

Exactly 18,656 parcels of land exist in the 11 street-lighting districts, which are a 2-year-old headache for county officials.

The cost of keeping the lights on is increasing, Sans said. With recent increases in PG&E rates, the county will be paying \$29,270 per month to keep them glowing with their less efficient bulbs.

Last year, the California Energy Commission awarded the county a \$300,000 loan to equip the lights with low-pressure sodium-vapor bulbs. With the new lights, Sans believes the monthly PG&E bills can be cut about two-thirds.

Because the commission has not used the loan, however, the commission has withdrawn it. Sans wants permission from the supervisors to try to get the loan back.

To do that, the supervisors must act quickly to buy the street lights from PG&E. But for the past year, negotiations have stalled over what price should be paid, Sans said.

PG&E feels the lights are worth \$678,000. County officials feel they may be worth as little as \$45,000, Sans said.

To break the impasse, PG&E District Manager G.H. Huxhold offered to sign a sales agreement without a price established. The utility and the county would continue to negotiate and, if no settlement is made, a Superior Court judge would be asked to determine the fair market value and fix the price.

The problem is finding money to buy the lights. Because little extra money is available in county government, the residents who benefit from the lights may have to pay PG&E for them, Sans said.

Special fees have not been popular in the 11 street-lighting districts. In the past two years, plans to charge residents extra so the county could pay its PG&E bills were dropped after they were opposed at public hearings by large, boisterous crowds.

Many residents have insisted that lights be turned off rather than pay extra money for them. Since 1980, the supervisors have used state funds to keep the lights on.

The board will consider Sans' plans Tuesday at 2:30 p.m. in the Hall of Justice and Records.