

Government. Business

Work Stops on Kensington Streetlights as Officials Question PG&E

By Charles Burress August 5, 2012

Contra Costa County officials, including Supervisor John Gioia, are questioning PG&E's replacement of Kensington's old lantern-style streetlights on wood poles with generic lights on steel poles. PG&E has halted work temporarily.



Though the job is mostly done, PG&E has temporarily halted its controversial removal of Kensington's old lantern-style streetlights on wood poles and installation of generic lights on plain steel poles, the company said Friday.

Following complaints from residents and concerns expressed by the Contra Costa County Public Works department, county Supervisor John Gioia contacted PG&E Friday "to express concern about the change in pole styles," Gioia said.

He said representatives from PG&E and the county public works department are scheduled to meet Tuesday to discuss the issue.

The lights line Arlington Avenue, Kensington's main street.

The public works department oversees streets in unincorporated Kensington and had understood, based on an earlier meeting between county staff and PG&E, that that the utility company would use decorative new poles to replace the old ones, according to an email from Warren Lai, county assistant public works director, to Gioia's office.

"Similar streetlight replacement projects in other unincorporated areas were done this way (aging decorative wood poles were replaced with new decorative light poles)," Lai said. "We are currently contacting our PG&E representative to determine why a standard galvanized pole is currently being installed, not a decorative alternative."

When Patch first wrote about the controversy, PG&E spokeswoman Tamar Sarkissian said the plain steel poles had been okayed by the public works department.

PG&E is replacing old wood poles throughout its service area with metal poles, which are available in unpainted steel with plain lights (the style being installed in Kensington) and in several decorative styles with poles of various colors and lights of various shapes. Five decorative styles – called Acorn, Granville, Memphis Teardrop, Vandemore and Epic – can be seen on PG&E's ["Decorative Street Light Product Series" webpage](#).

Sarkissian said two types of decorative streetlights could have been available for the Kensington replacement project: an "acorn" style, with an acorn-shaped light perched on top of a dark-colored pole, or a "teardrop" style, which is a suspended light, also on dark-hued pole. Both of the poles are aluminum-based metal, she said.

Photos of Kensington's old wood poles with lantern-style lights and the new plain steel poles that PG&E is installing are attached to this article.

PG&E began cutting down the old wood-pole lights on July 24, and the controversy began to flare the next day when the phone started ringing in the office of Kensington Police Chief Greg Harman, who serves also as general manager of Kensington's quasi-local government, the Kensington Police Protection and Community Services District. Upset residents wanted to know what could be done to stop the work.

There seems to be little if any dispute over PG&E's rationale for replacing the old wood poles, which have hollow cores for wires. They're about 30 years old, and the new metal poles are longer-lasting and safer, Sarkissian said. The issue seems to be what to replace them with.

Gioia said stopping work on the project at this point would be an appropriate course until the issue is resolved.

"I believe the Kensington community is entitled to be consulted and have input before the style is changed," he said.

Sarkissian said PG&E is suspending work on the project this weekend and next week. She said she was not sure whether the controversy was the reason for the halt.

She said PG&E will meet with county representatives "to discuss their new concerns."

She said the utility is replacing between 55 and 60 streetlights in Kensington and that 40 have already been done.

Asked if the new plain steel poles that have already been installed could be replaced with decorative ones, she said, "That's going to be discussed."

Gioia also said possible removal of the shiny plain steel poles is "obviously going to be part of the discussion of the meeting."