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FINANCING OPERATIONS

PG&E proposal would raise monthly bills

Residences would pay about \$5.50 more, utility says

By George Avalos
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OAKLAND » PG&E filed a proposal that could benefit shareholders but raise monthly bills for customers, depending on the outcome of a new regulatory proceeding that's tied to the cost of financing the utility's operations.

The potential for higher bills arrives at a time when

PG&E has been battling to keep ratepayer costs to an annual increase that is close to the general inflation rate, as measured by consumer prices.

The proceeding is a way for PG&E to increase payments to shareholders so it can attract more investors seeking a higher return for the utility's cost of doing business.

The cost of capital proposal is part of a regulatory process to explore how PG&E's investments are financed — and what burden falls on ratepayers as a result.

Oakland-based PG&E,

Southern California Edison, San Diego Gas & Electric and SoCal Gas all submitted on Thursday their cost of capital applications for 2026. State rules oblige California's major utilities to submit cost of capital applications every three years.

"If approved, PG&E's proposal would increase residential customer bills by approximately \$5.50 per month, reflecting a higher interest rate environment," PG&E stated in an email sent to this news or-

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A crew from PG&E works on a utility pole along Poplar Avenue on March 11 in Richmond.

ARIC CRABB
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SARATOGA



PHOTOS BY SHAE HAMMOND — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Baby squirrels are fed a special formula at the Larry Ellison Conservation Center in Saratoga on Wednesday.

Facility helps animals get back to the wild

Care center is run by the Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA

By Nollyanne Delacruz
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Hidden in the hills off Highway 9 along Saratoga Creek, a new wildlife facility is thrumming with life, caring for animals that may be sick, injured or imperiled.

The new wildlife care center opened Sunday and is run by the Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA. The center cares for animals that are brought in by animal control agencies and the public from across San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Nicole Weger, wildlife director of operations, said the center takes in all wildlife, whether the animal is native, exotic, endangered or threatened.

"It's important also to our future," Weger said. "It's important for the wildlife, but it's also important for the humans."

The 197-acre facility boasts several nurseries and enclo-



Nicole Weger, wildlife director of operations at Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA, gives a tour of the center. It has several nurseries and enclosures to help birds, mammals and other species recover.

tures to help birds, mammals and other species recover. Each enclosure is relatively isolated to prevent the animals from having more human or interspecies interaction than necessary

so they can recover safely. Bobcats, foxes and coyote are kept separate from corvids like crows and ravens, and birds of prey, like falcons and owls, and seabirds, like ducks and pelicans,

also have their own enclosures with ponds and space for them to fly.

Lisa Van Buskirk, senior vice president of development, planned giving and community engagement, said the facility was paid for with a grant from the Larry Ellison Foundation. Planning and construction of the facility were in the works on and off for 14 years due to disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of Wednesday, the facility was relatively empty, save for a few squirrels and hummingbirds, whose babies are typically born in the spring and need caring for. However, Weger said they expect the population to keep growing and are preparing to care for more animals in the summer. She said there were over 500 animals in the organization's two facilities last summer. The population

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LIVERMORE

State ethics watchdog investigating councilman

Ben Barrientos voted against housing project that was near his home

By Kyle Martin
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LIVERMORE » The state's ethics watchdog has opened a conflict-of-interest investigation against Livermore Councilman Ben Barrientos after he voted no on a housing development that could create more traffic and other problems near his home.

Barrientos' vote last year came despite advice from the state's Fair Political Practices Commission that he had a "disqualifying financial interest" because his home was too close to the project.

Under the Political Reform Act, public officials are not allowed to participate or use their position to influence governmental decisions when they know it could financially benefit them. Because Barrientos owns a home about 700 feet away, he should have recused himself from any vote on the Garaventa Hills development, the FPCC's lawyer advised Livermore City Attorney Jason Alcalá in a June 2023 letter.

Barrientos did not return multiple requests for comment.

The Garaventa Hills development proposes to build 44 residential homes — 38 detached single-family homes and an additional six attached affordable single-family units — on a 31-acre plot at the west end of Bear Creek Drive, north of Altamont Creek Elementary School and Altamont Creek Park.

More than a decade in the making, the project has undergone re-

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ALAMEDA COUNTY

Why is \$1.5M in park fees not being kept and spent?

Funding earmarked for maintenance will instead return to property buyers

By Chase Hunter
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Recent Alameda County homeowners and developers will see thousands of dollars in payments after in-lieu fees for park maintenance went unspent by the county for more than five years.

But for community parks, the refund is nothing to celebrate.

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted last week to return more than \$1.5 million, and supervisors discussed upcoming legislation to give community volunteers more control over the allocation of in-lieu park fees in the future.

Parks fees are collected for each new home constructed by either a household or a housing developer as part of an effort to mitigate the impact of new park users

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Use of diversity statements in hiring banned

Academic departments have required applicants to describe how they would contribute to campus diversity

By Molly Gibbs
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The University of California will no longer allow diversity statements to be used for faculty hiring, the system announced this week — abandoning a controversial practice that UC spearheaded for over a decade.

The change comes as UC battles pushback from Donald Trump's administration over

diversity initiatives and the federal government has threatened to withhold millions of dollars in funding from universities that have programs or policies related to diversity, equity and inclusion. The administration has already slashed millions of dollars in federal funds from Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Diversity statements generally ask job applicants to describe how they would contrib-

ute to campus diversity. The UC Board of Regents adopted a commitment to achieving diversity among university faculty and students in 2007 and many UC academic departments and programs have since required applicants to describe how they have prioritized diversity in their careers and how they would advance diversity and inclusion in their role at UC.

But in a reversal, the decision to scrap the statements also

came from the regents, who are currently gathered at UCLA in their first meeting since the federal government launched several investigations into the university system and UC campuses over allegations of antisemitism and discrimination.

In a Wednesday letter to campus provosts announcing the change, UC provost Katherine Newman said some programs,

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Diversity

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departments and recruitments have required diversity statements as part of the hiring process, “despite the fact that the University of California has never maintained such a system-wide policy.”

“The requirement to submit a diversity statement may lead applicants to focus on an aspect of their candidacy that is outside their expertise or prior ex-

perience,” Newman said in the letter. “To be clear, stand-alone diversity statements will no longer be permitted in recruitments.”

She said faculty will still be allowed to share any “inclusive academic achievements in teaching, research and service” during the academic review process and reaffirmed the university system’s commitment to serving all communities.

In 2018, UC Berkeley received funding from the UC Office of the President to conduct a cluster hire to expand and recruit diver-

sity in the life sciences departments. Nearly 1,000 applications were received for five open faculty positions, and a campus hiring committee narrowed the pool of applicants to 214 — based solely on candidates’ contributions to diversity, equity and inclusion.

This week, the system-wide change garnered praise from critics of the practice, who called diversity statements “loyalty oaths” and “tools of discrimination” that promote race-based hiring and are used to weed out applicants opposed to diver-

sity initiatives.

“Mandatory diversity statements can too easily become a test of political ideology and conformity,” said UC Davis mathematics professor Abigail Thompson in a 2019 Wall Street Journal opinion piece where she criticized UC Berkeley’s rubric used to score an applicant’s diversity statement.

The University of California was sued over its use of diversity statements in 2023, but the case was tossed out by a federal judge in January 2024.

But others expressed concern that the regents’ decision is an attempt to appease President Trump and his administration’s crack-down on diversity, equity and inclusion programs in higher education and protect UC funding.

UC President Michael Drake announced a system-wide hiring freeze Wednesday in preparation for funding impacts at both the state and federal level. Stanford, Harvard and Johns Hopkins University have also announced hiring freezes or job cuts as a way to cut

costs and prepare for additional Trump administration funding cuts.

“The timing of this decision ... indicates that it is not actually about what materials we request from job candidates,” said Mara Loveman, a UC Berkeley professor and board member of the Berkeley Faculty Association. The decision “is clearly a minimal effort to defend the University of California against the Trump administration’s authoritarian attacks on higher education in California and across the country.”

Center

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fluctuates with the seasons, growing through the spring and reaching its peak into the summer and then falling again in fall and winter.

The care center also houses an imperiled species program. Senior lead biologist Dr. Regina Spranger said “imperiled” is used broadly to mean any animal species facing survival challenges since the center doesn’t solely care for federally endangered or threatened species.

There are currently two species in the program: the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander and the giant

garter snake, which hails from central California. Invasive species and climate change are some of the reasons why these species are in danger, but the major threat is agricultural and human development, which have cut off these populations from each other, making them unable to breed in the wild. Their young are being taken care of in the facility until they are old enough to be released into the wild and help restart their respective populations.

Spranger said both of these animals are important for their environments. The giant garter snake helps with pest management and maintaining the fish and wildlife popu-

lation. The salamander also helps maintain biodiversity by serving as its ecosystem’s top predator.

Though visitors to the care center will be limited to keep human/animal interaction to a minimum, there is an intake center on the campus, located at 24103 Congress Springs Road, where the public can bring in any injured or orphaned wildlife they find. The intake center is open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Anyone dropping off an animal would need to fill out paperwork related to where he/she found the animal, what happened to it, and if he/she gave it anything so the staff has as much information as it can to return it into the wild.



Dr. Regina Spranger, conservation biologist, holds a Santa Cruz long-toed salamander at the Larry Ellison Conservation Center in Saratoga.

SHAE HAMMOND
STAFF
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PG&E

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ganization.

The increase in monthly bills won’t occur before 2026, according to the filing.

PG&E said an array of factors currently influence its operating costs and the expense to finance them. Among the factors:

- Prices and interest rates that might be influenced by inflation and supply chain disruptions.
- Federal government

actions that could impact costs.

- Extreme weather events.

- A California policy that makes utilities strictly liable for damages that their equipment can cause, such as a wildfire. This policy, unique to California, is called inverse condemnation.

One of the key components of the proposal is PG&E’s estimate for the rate of return on equity investment that the utility deems reasonable.

In prior proceedings,

consumer groups have criticized PG&E’s methodology for determining an appropriate rate of return for its investments in the company’s operations.

PG&E estimated that 11.3% is a reasonable rate of return, an assessment that was supported by a third-party expert who provided testimony in the filing. PG&E’s prior rate of return on its equity was 10.28%.

Regardless of what the PUC determines is a reasonable rate of return, PG&E isn’t guaranteed to recover its costs. The application

simply provides an opportunity for the utility to recoup its costs.

The dividend that PG&E pays its shareholders is the utility industry’s lowest. PG&E reinvests 97% of what it earns back into the company and its operations, the company stated.

PG&E hopes that a federal Energy Department loan guarantee totaling \$15 billion, in one of the final acts of former President Joe Biden’s administration, might ease its efforts to corral financing.

The loan guarantee will

enable PG&E to obtain financing through unique funding sources that could provide lower interest costs compared with conventional loan vehicles.

PG&E noted that financing its costs over a longer period rather than immediately charging the expenditures to the rate base — and customer bills — is a way to ease the burden on ratepayers.

Even with the potential rate increase, PG&E is attempting to keep increases to an annual rate that is within the rough range of inflation, a goal that PG&E

CEO Patricia Poppe expressed to this news organization in April 2024.

“We see a future where customers’ bills can start to come down,” Poppe said.

By the first billing cycle in January 2025, PG&E had achieved that goal. The utility believes it can continue to do so.

“PG&E expects average annual bill increases still will be limited to 2% to 4%, through 2026, without sacrificing safety,” PG&E spokesperson Lynsey Paulo stated in an email to this news organization.

Return

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on park and open space facilities. The refunds include \$726,404 from Hayward, more than \$504,004 from Castro Valley, \$108,804 from Fairview and \$105,578 from Pleasanton among other sums. These fees must be returned by the county to the current property owner if they’re not spent within five years, according to the county’s rules.

“The last request for park fees was made by HARD (Hayward Area Recreation and Park District) in 2016, and during the interim, the park fees have contin-

ued to be collected with a substantial balance now of over \$4 million,” according to county documents. “The bulk of the refunds are due to property owners in Castro Valley and Ashland/Cherryland/San Lorenzo, with smaller amounts due to other parts of the Eden Area, as well as East County.”

Refunds to households and developers range from \$2,400 to \$407,000, with the median refund being \$9,000, according to a county staff report. The refund most significantly impacts Alameda County’s unincorporated communities of Ashland, Cherryland Fairview, Eden and Castro Valley, where many

residents do not have access to a park near their homes and there are concerns about the quality of publicly used spaces. Just 44% of Castro Valley residents live within a 10-minute walking distance of a park, according to the San Francisco-based nonprofit Trust for Public Land.

Some residents said the refunds will only make things worse.

“To have these funds lost to the wind is pretty unacceptable for those of us who live here,” said Castro Valley resident Matt Turner. “My kids live in a neighborhood with no parks. Zero. We have to drive to a sports field that’s a 4.5-mile round-trip walk to the near-

est public basketball hoop. We need this money.”

Supervisor Nate Miley, whose district encompasses many of the unincorporated communities affected by the refunds, said there are pros and cons to the refunds.

“It’s unfortunate that the park fees were not utilized for park purposes,” Miley said, “but the law requires they be refunded, and it’s rare that government is refunding money back to taxpayers. So in that sense, it’s a good thing. In the sense that these aren’t available for park use, that’s a bad thing ... I’m not putting blame on the planning staff or the Community Development Agency for miss-

ing this, but I know HARD was very eager you get these funds.”

To reduce the chance of this happening in the future, Miley said the Board of Supervisors will introduce an ordinance in the “very near future” that would give greater oversight power to municipal advisory councils made up of residents in unincorporated communities who provide recommendations to the Board of Supervisors. The ordinance would redefine the power of MACs from purely advisory bodies to decision-making bodies with limited access to county funds, he said. If supervisors pass new powers to MACs, their members will be subject to new state

ethics codes

Alameda County residents like Eden Area Municipal Advisory Council member Tyler Dragoni refuted Miley’s framing of the issue during the public comment period of the meeting, stating that a true “correction” would allocate county funding to support unincorporated county parks.

“The correction is funding our park district for the funds that the county — through its own inability — lost. That’s the correction,” Dragoni said. “This is a \$1.5 million, and you’re just going to go, ‘Oopsie. Better luck next time.’ You need to be responsible and take accountability for what the county lost.”

Barrientos

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visions and stalled in 2019, after an organization called the Save The Hill Group filed a petition in Alameda County Superior Court challenging the adequacy of the

city’s environmental review. Ultimately, the city had to rescind its approval of the project in November 2022.

Enter Barrientos, who was elected to the City Council that same month. In late 2024, he cast a lone vote against the project, which abuts a road near his home, and openly questioned why

more had not been done to study possible hazards on the land. He said he could smell “whiffs” of oil there, according to a transcript of his comments included in the FPPC investigative file.

“So my concern is ... I’m not going to gain anything out of it one way or the other ... I don’t have a vested in-

terest. I’m just a retired teacher so I don’t have a ton of money sitting around somewhere so I can go buy a bigger house,” he said at the meeting, according to the transcript. “So I’m concerned about what’s going on there and I hope that we can table it and let a third party come in and check it

out and see, can this oil be taken care of? Will it be guaranteed?”

He said he was “sorry to throw a little monkey wrench in this, but I’m supporting and helping my constituents understand that I do fight for them.”

Barrientos allegedly posted on NextDoor weeks

before the meeting that “his rights were being taken and that he should be able to participate despite being cautioned by the FPPC,” according to the commission.

The FPPC investigation, which came after the commission received an anonymous complaint, began Jan. 9 and remains active.

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