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Letters : Opinion: It's Time to Choose

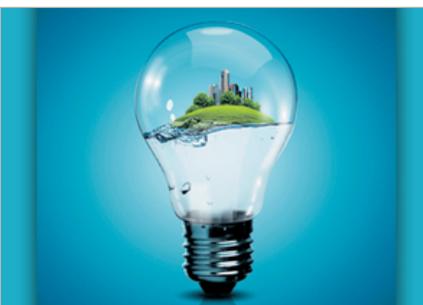
Janet Wolf, Salud Carbajal
June 28, 2015 12:11 AM

As county supervisors, we have spent the last month monitoring and evaluating the causes and impacts of the Plains Refugio oil spill. We have advocated that the resources needed for clean-up are properly and timely allocated. This tragedy along the Gaviota coast brings back memories of the 1969 oil spill. That spill, which is the third-largest in U.S. history behind only the Deepwater Horizon in 2010 and Exxon Valdez in 1989, was the impetus for monumental changes in the public's attitude and demands for the right to a clean and safe environment.

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Out of our local tragedy in 1969 a bipartisan international movement led to the formation of critical public policies still essential to our lives today — the Clean Air and Water Acts, the California Coastal Act, the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration, which for the first time linked the public policies of the ocean and the atmosphere into one system. Now, as our community recovers from our largest spill since 1969, we once again have a chance to implement an equally visionary response that will move us into a 21st economy and transitions us away from fossil fuels and toward a renewable energy future. This opportunity is called Community Choice Energy, also known as Community Choice Aggregation.

Under our current energy procurement system, the power sources and rates for the electricity we consume are chosen for us by our Investor Owned Utility. For Southern Santa Barbara County, this utility is Southern California Edison, with PG&E providing service for North County. If we as consumers want to increase our use of renewables and decrease use of fossil fuels, we cannot do so since the IOU procures energy for us.

However, with CCE local governments may collaborate to form a Joint Powers Authority, which becomes an energy purveyor with the authority to purchase electrical energy on the wholesale market. The JPA chooses the sources of electrical power for the community and sets its own rates. Since the JPA is composed of local public officials, the public has a voice in selecting the types of energy being procured, the percentage of renewables in the portfolio, and the rate structure. In addition, CCE is voluntary. Should individual customers not want to participate in CCE, they have an option to continue service with their utility.

Community Choice Energy has bipartisan support and has been implemented in jurisdictions including the city of Lancaster, Sonoma County and Marin County, with many more expressing interest. Marin has established a highly successful CCE program called Marin Clean Energy. According to information provided by Marin Clean Energy, customers are currently offered choices of either 50 percent or 100 percent renewable energy for their homes and businesses, compared to the single option offered by PG&E. (Currently, PG&E's electricity mix comprises 22 percent

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renewables. State law requires that to be 33 percent by 2020.)

Even with the higher percentage of renewables provided by MCE, rates are competitive with PG&E, with the 50 percent renewables package actually being slightly cheaper on a typical monthly bill. In 2014 alone, the cost savings for Marin Clean Energy customers totaled approximately \$6 million, which includes the city of Richmond, saving \$107,000 for its municipal operations. This translates into an economic benefit of keeping \$6 million within the local economy of the MCE coverage area.

Additional financial benefits of Community Choice Energy programs are achieved through its structural set-up. CCE is financed by the revenues received from customers based on the electricity they consume. This means it is a self-sustaining system with no new taxes. Furthermore, as a not-for-profit public agency, its overhead costs — including executive compensation — are cheaper than an Investor Owned Utility, and any financial benefits directly serve the community. Benefits can be used to create new jobs by implementing local renewable energy projects and efficiency upgrade programs that are developed with local residents' input, which may also be customized to meet our unique energy needs, such as the development of micro-grids.

To make CCE a reality, there are three phases that must take place. The first is a feasibility and technical study. This includes identifying the jurisdictions that want to participate, conducting a technical analysis to understand the amount of energy that would need to be procured, and creating an analysis of options on how to structure the CCE entity and community outreach. Phase two is the development of an implementation plan in coordination with the Public Utility Commission, and phase three is enrollment.

On June 10 we were proud to continue our community's legacy of environmental stewardship by voting to allocate funding to commence the feasibility phase of CCE as part of our adopted budget for Fiscal Year 2015-16. This action comes with the support of the Community Environmental Council and other local organizations. The result is that we are moving toward a time when oil spills will be a thing of the past, and our community has something it has never had in its energy consumption: choice and competition.

As we recover from the Plains Refugio oil spill, future generations will judge us by how we respond, just as we now do for those in 1969. Will they be asking us why we didn't act to prevent another oil spill, or will they be thanking us for building a community powered by renewable energy, including the sun, which we enjoy nearly year-round? The choice is ours.

The authors sit on the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors.

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