

An informed vote is LAFCO's goal

By Beth Curda/Enterprise staff writer

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Editor's note: This is the second of two parts.

SACRAMENTO — Chris Tooker has been relatively calm lately, considering he is about to make a decision that could affect hundreds of thousands of people.

Maybe it's because he does that all the time.

Tooker is chairman of the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission, the body scheduled to rule this week on whether the Sacramento Municipal Utility District can annex into its service territory Davis, Woodland, West Sacramento and rural Yolo County areas connecting the cities.

The decision he and his colleagues will make will not be the final say in the issue, but he knows voters in Sacramento and Yolo County will look to them for an objective, educated ruling.

For nine months, the group has made itself the referee and judge in an intense battle over 70,000 electricity customers in Yolo County. He has read reports stacked tall enough to measure with a ruler, maybe more than one ruler.

He has spent hours listening to consultants report on numbers and energy forecasts, then hours listening to supporters and opponents debate their merits.

But he knows what to do in a situation like this: focus on the mission and decision-making framework created by the state-adopted Cortese-Knox Local Government Reorganization Act for all counties' LAFCOs.

“The bottom line is it's not a popularity contest,” Tooker said.

It's about making an informed decision and following a criteria, he said. According to the way LAFCO is set up, when it votes on an annexation, the incorporation of a city or other boundary-related matters in its jurisdiction, it must show evidence to back up its rulings.

He calls it an “informed record” — a set of findings and proof to support the statements.

LAFCO will meet at 5:30 p.m. Thursday in the Board Chambers at the Sacramento County Administration Center, 700 H St., Sacramento.

At the heart of LAFCO's decision is one question: Could SMUD provide equal or better service to the Yolo County customers, as compared with PG&E's service today? If it

believes the answer to that is “yes,” it will vote accordingly and send the matter to the voters in November.

For LAFCO, it is not about nailing down a price SMUD must pay PG&E for its electrical poles, transmission lines and other equipment in the area being considered for annexation. It is not a question of exactly how much each utility will pay years from now to supply energy to its customers, or exactly what rates they will charge.

On some of those issues, everyone agrees, only time — or a court ruling — will tell.

Instead, LAFCO is looking for a range of costs and information from SMUD on how it would handle the extra business and how changes in costs would affect the rates it charges its customers.

As of early this week, Tooker did not feel like he had all the answers he needed. LAFCO members held off earlier this month on one of the rulings they must make on the issue because they needed to have their staff gather more information on a couple of topics.

One of those concerned future natural gas prices. SMUD’s plan is to supply Yolo County with natural gas-fueled electricity only, at first, rather than the more diverse mix of energy sources from which its other customers draw.

Tooker is awaiting an answer to how the utility plans to smooth out for its customers the uncertainty in natural gas prices in the future. He also is awaiting a response from LAFCO’s legal counsel to assumptions made in some of the reports that PG&E is interpreting differently.

He and his colleagues need answers to those questions and any others they have before they can decide.

How much paper has Tooker seen in the past nine months?

“A lot,” he said from his cubicle at the California Energy Commission in Sacramento.

The challenge has not been just the amount of paper inundating Tooker and his colleagues. It’s the steady stream of information from both sides — reports, followed by more reports, some of which are supposed to replace earlier findings.

“It’s kind of like, enough already,” Tooker said of the repeated filings of information from both sides. “Let’s freeze this at some point. And let’s have one set of information” and decide.

He has tried to make sure new reports are comprehensive and tie their information back into earlier discussions so the commission can put it all together without having to go back and track it all again.

There is a lot riding on LAFCO's decision. Ultimately, voters will decide the matter, if LAFCO approves it.

It is the voters' responsibility to know what they are deciding, but LAFCO will be informing that process if it votes in favor.

"I'm comfortable with it because it's the democratic process," Tooker said. "It's the way the law defines it. ... It gives people the ability to choose the kinds of services they want, on the stipulation that there's been some independent evaluation of those services to be provided."

LAFCO's open process and analytical framework are what Tooker likes about it. He is a supporter of open government and democracy and finds the process "refreshing," he said.

"To me, it's not a problem or question. It seems very much the way things should be."

— Reach Beth Curda at bcurda@davisenterprise.net or 747-8045.

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