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City has power to choose

By: Alisha Semchuck



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PALMDALE - City Council members faced two energy options Tuesday night: to enter an agreement as part of an energy aggregate proposed by Los Angeles County or

to join an existing energy program formed by the city of Lancaster.

After a lengthy discussion on both programs, including brief presentations by representatives for each, council members decided to turn down the county plan for now and explore whether the Lancaster project would suit Palmdale's needs.

A motion to adopt an ordinance approving a joint powers agreement with Los Angeles Community Choice Energy and authorizing implementation of a community choice aggregation program failed on a 3-2 vote.

In such a program, cities and other entities come together to purchase energy, usually from a single provider, driving down the cost for each of the participants.

While Mayor Jim Ledford and Councilwoman Laura Bettencourt voted for the county plan, Mayor Pro Tem Steve Hofbauer and Councilmembers Juan Carrillo and Austin Bishop opposed it.

However, the council left open the possibility of going back to the county in the future.

The council approved, on a 4-1 vote, a consultant services agreement with the California Community Choice Energy Authority, a joint powers agreement initiated by Lancaster Choice Energy.

That means Palmdale will pay roughly \$63,000 for an evaluation study before signing a participation agreement for the program.

"I can't support this motion," Ledford said, adding that he didn't know the amount of savings residents would see. "I want to cooperate locally. But to do it without information, to me that is a scary place to be."

Ben Lucha, Palmdale's senior management analyst, described the council's decision on the plans as a "chicken and egg situation."

The county plan is in its early stages, Lucha said, and it would be better to join now to be part of the decision-making process. Joining the plan at this time would cost nothing, he said.

No matter which plan was chosen, Southern California Edison would still provide the wires and transmit the energy to customers, Lucha said.

"It sounds like we'd have a better opportunity with Lancaster," Carrillo said.

"What's in the best interest for our city?" Ledford responded. "We may have to invest in a county study."

L.A. County has some answers that could help Palmdale's decision, according to Gary Gero, chief sustainability officer for the county.

"We have done the analysis, updated the analysis," Gero said, adding that consumers would see a 6% savings on their net bill.

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The county will starting meetings of the joint powers authority in August, he said.

"It's a misnomer to call it the county's program. It is a city's and county's program. The county has just one vote like the others," Gero said.

In pitching the Lancaster plan, Vice Mayor Marvin Crist told Palmdale council members, "We need to do things on our own. It's been proven (the county) does not support us. Every one of you has seen what the county has done to us."

It's time for the two cities to work together, Crist added.

Lancaster residents who joined the program are saving 4.6% on their electric bills, according to City Manager Mark Bozigian. "That's not an estimate. That's an exact bill.

"Just today our council made a decision to provide energy-efficiency grants for small businesses. It's a real thing that's really happening. You control your own destiny.

"There is some economy of scale. We go with a very large company" as the energy supplier.

"Who are you getting energy from?" Carrillo asked.

"Direct Energy (of Houston, Texas, leading provider of electricity) and two smaller agreements," Bozigian said.

The bulk of Lancaster's energy comes from a small wind power farm in Tehachapi, according to Deputy City Manager Jason Caudle.

He told council members multiple sources of energy exist that they could purchase in the process, such as wind and solar renewables.

"You set your priorities as a council," Caudle said. "The power rests with the City Council. The type of energy rests with this council. Rate setting rests with the council. You know the number and can make decisions based on that.

"We know the exact cost of power," he said. "We know the operational costs."

"When I read the agreement, it looks like a lot of good information could come out," said Palmdale's attorney, Matt Ditzhazy, adding that Lancaster is "ahead in that respect."

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