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Officials' support scripted by SDG&E

By [Jeff McDonald](#)
Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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OVERVIEW

Background: San Diego Gas & Electric Co. has proposed shutting off power to 60,000 customers in the backcountry during hot-and-dry conditions as a way to keep from sparking wildfires.

What's changing: The county Board of Supervisors opposes the plan and was lobbied by local elected officials who sent letters written by the utility.

The future: The state's Public Utilities Commission is expected to decide on the plan later this summer.

Just before Tuesday's debate over a plan to prevent backcountry wildfires by cutting off power during the worst conditions, county supervisors received letters from elected officials across the region urging support.

El Cajon Mayor Mark Lewis, La Mesa Mayor Art Madrid and Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler sent a joint e-mail. Letters with similar wording came from San Diego City Council members Marti Emerald, Tony Young and Ben Hueso.

All of the correspondence closed with the suggestion that county officials work with the plan's sponsor, San Diego Gas & Electric Co., to improve the overall response to regional emergencies.

The letters were written by the utility's public-relations staff, according to documents obtained by The San Diego Union-Tribune, and confirmed by elected officials who signed them.

Madrid and Lewis said they have accepted campaign contributions from the company, but that's not why they supported the utility's power-shut-off plan. They confirmed that SDG&E delivered a draft letter to their offices Monday supporting the utility's plan. Both mayors said they read it, signed it and sent it back to the utility.

“I agreed to it, and that was it,” Lewis said. “I'm comfortable with it.”

Madrid, who said he changed two words in the draft, said the shut-off plan is a way to help protect his

constituents and noted that he has opposed other SDG&E projects.

“It's not uncommon for people to send me letters and say, 'Hey, would you sign it?' ” Madrid said. “I'm not their lackey.”

Hueso spokeswoman Michelle Ganon said it was not “hugely unusual” for a constituent to write a letter and then seek the council president's signature.

“Typically, what we would do is investigate any facts that need to be checked and we would modify the request as appropriate,” Ganon said. “In this case, there was a real time issue.”

Ganon said Hueso, who also has accepted SDG&E contributions, would never make a decision based on whether someone made a political donation.

“Ben does a lot of things for a lot of people, whether or not they contribute to his campaign,” Ganon said. “Ben is an independent man.”

Pfeiler, Emerald and Young all declined to answer questions.

In a written statement, SDG&E spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said the company is “active in making sure that others in the community understand our positions.”

“Mayor Madrid, Mayor Holt Pfeiler and Mayor Lewis all support our position on the fire safety plan,” Donovan added. “The actions of the county could have implications to their cities.”

Sempra Energy, SDG&E's parent company, donated more than \$3.2 million to political groups and candidates in 2008, according to the California Secretary of State's Office.

The company also gathered wide regional support for the Sunrise Powerlink, a contentious, 120-mile transmission line that state regulators approved on a split vote last year. SDG&E listed five pages of Sunrise Powerlink supporters on its Web site, including many public officials.

In late 2007, as the transmission line was being debated, SDG&E gave \$20 million to a foundation it set up to make grants to nonprofit groups, federal records show. Several nonprofit groups lent their support to the project.

Dianne Jacob, chairwoman of the county Board of Supervisors, has criticized SDG&E's business practices for years. She said the letters are the latest example of a deliberate plan by the utility to curry influence from community leaders.

“I'm not really shocked by any of this because of my experience with SDG&E during Sunrise,” Jacob said. “This is the way this utility has done business.”

“It's disappointing, getting letters at the eleventh hour from elected officials that have no direct interest in the issue and never bothered to attend the hearings.”

This month, Jacob complained that many of the speakers who supported SDG&E's power-shut-off plan at a community meeting in Alpine did not disclose their professional relationships with the utility. At least eight speakers were connected to it.

Ray Scheele of the Bowen Center for Public Affairs at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., said electric utilities are skilled when it comes to influencing public officials because they have been regulated for more than 100 years.

“It's not surprising to me that they would be using this particular approach to win their point of view,”

Scheele said. "The practice is ethically questionable, especially when the company donates money to political campaigns."

Despite the letters supporting the shut-off proposal, the board voted 4-0 to ask the California Public Utilities Commission to reject SDG&E's plan.

According to his staff, Supervisor Bill Horn has signed similar letters proposed by constituents.

"There are occasions when our office uses suggested draft language in a letter of support or opposition from organizations. . . . We sometimes use their research on an issue to help in making a decision," Horn spokesman John Culea wrote in response to questions.

Supervisor Ron Roberts left the board meeting before the vote, but said he would support a shut-off plan controlled by the government. Roberts downplayed the idea of companies writing letters for elected officials.


"The letter showed the mayors' support of SDG&E's position irrespective of who drafted it," Roberts said. "The decision to sign was their own."

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