

Chapter Chair Chat, July 2022

Let Every Voice Be Heard

By Carole Mintzer, Chapter Chair

Throughout the year, the Chapter receives requests to speak in support of or against a variety of action items before various boards, councils, commissions, etc. As just a few examples, in the past year, we have commented on night hiking & biking, groundwater sustainability, redistricting, and conservation easements. And by “we,” I mean primarily our Chapter Director, Conservation Committee Chair, and me.



Yes, there are times when we reach out to all our members and supporters with a request to submit individual comments to public agencies, and we so appreciate the response those requests receive. It makes a difference! But often, a letter or public comment from the Chapter is sufficient to get our point across, and often the deadline for comments is too short to make broader action possible.

One of the more startling requests came in February when we learned that the Policy Board of Central Coast Community Energy (3CE) was proposing a significant change to the bylaws of their Community Advisory Committee (CAC) that would limit the topics on which the public would be allowed to comment or which the advisory committee would be allowed to agendize. This was quite a reversal from when the CAC was established in 2018. At that time, a member of the Policy Board declared that there would be no “no fly zones” and that the CAC “can certainly make recommendations on anything, and make comment on anything.”

So what happened? Was it because the community is asking for workforce and environmental justice standards to be in place for new energy projects? Apparently, this wasn’t on the radar or in the strategic plan of the Policy Board and therefore, the suggestion was “inconvenient.” So, rather than respond to the request from the community, the Policy Board and its staff tried to change the rules and make it more difficult for the community to bring new ideas forward.

We joined other organizations and individuals and asked the Policy Board to table the bylaws change until they learned more and considered other options. Here’s what I said on behalf of the Sierra Club at that February meeting:

"Good morning, my name is Carole Mintzer, and I am the Chair of the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club, serving San Luis Obispo County.

"We could not agree less with the premise, conclusions, and tone of the staff report, and staff's proposed amendments to your bylaws. At one point, the staff report unfortunately characterizes public input as 'crowd-sourced proposals that lack staff analysis,' as if those voices don't merit being heard.

"The role of the Advisory Council is to be representatives of the community. And this organization will never get where it needs to go or surmount the obstacles that face all community choice programs in California, if it does not have a policy in place ensuring that transitioning to a clean energy economy is accomplished equitably. And it will never have that if your board and CEO are sealed off from the community and hear only from an echo chamber.

"You will never get there if you take the position that encouraging the use of local labor in construction work with an emphasis on hiring women, minorities, and gender non-conforming residents of low-income communities, veterans, and the formerly incarcerated; or supporting a prevailing wage and apprenticeship programs are basically none of your business.

"We urge you to table the vote on this item, and instead host a workshop to determine how community-driven priorities are to reach your Board. Look, community input can be messy but it's important to allow community members to bring new ideas to your board."

After they heard from 26 speakers (in addition to multiple emails submitted before the meeting) asking them to delay the bylaws changes (and only 3 speakers in support of the changes), the Policy Board agreed to hire a consultant to learn more about the issue and make recommendations.

By the time of the Policy Board's June meeting, the consultant's report was complete, recommendations made, and another attempt to change the bylaws was put forward. Again, the changes would have served to control and stifle the community voice by limiting the topics on which the advisory committee could advise, strictly limiting it to items in a Work Plan developed by the Policy Board Chair and staff. There would be little opportunity for community members to raise new issues.

This time, Andrew Christie, our Chapter Director, provided written comments and I spoke at the June meeting. We reiterated our support for community choice energy and spoke about the value of community input, especially for bringing new ideas forward. As Andrew wrote in his statement, "Public input should be treated as a requirement. You need more information, not less, when forming policy decisions."

In the end, after receiving "a lot" of email about the proposed changes, the 3CE staff had a change of heart and recommended suspending the bylaws for a year rather than moving forward with the proposed bylaws changes. They plan to use the year to work on improving the relationship among the CAC, staff, and the Policy Board. The new Chair of the CAC agreed with this and the Policy Board voted to follow the new recommendation.

This was a unique opportunity to use our voice to speak up for the community voice and ensure that it will continue to be heard. We hope 3CE can work out the management issues that led to the effort to marginalize the community's voice. We'll be watching and advocating to keep the COMMUNITY in Central Coast Community Energy.

Until next time, stay safe, get outdoors, and let your voice be heard,

Carole