

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Calif. Public Utilities Commission holds Nov. 7 forum in Tulare for energy pilot projects to help five disadvantaged communities in Tulare County

November 7, 2018

By: Reggie Ellis

TULARE – While California is among the top states in the nation in electricity generation from renewable resources, many San Joaquin Valley communities still rely on propane and wood burning to cook, make hot water and heat their homes.

Over 150 central valley communities do not have access to natural gas. These residents have endured a lifetime of high energy costs and the negative health effects that come with smoke from wood burning and fumes from propane use.

“Those people that make a lot less than the average household have had to pay some of the highest costs for propane,” said Abigail Solis, a Community Development Specialist with Self-Help Enterprises (SHE).

Solis made her comments to the Tulare County Board of Supervisors on Oct. 30 during an announcement that the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) will be holding a public forum on “Increasing Access to Energy in the San Joaquin Valley” at 6 p.m. today, Wednesday, Nov. 7 in the Tulare Council Chambers, 475 N. M St. in Tulare.

Solis explained that in 2014, SHE worked to pass Assembly Bill 2672. The law requires the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to identify disadvantaged communities in San Joaquin Valley counties that lack affordable energy access and analyze the economic feasibility of affordable energy alternatives.

Spanish interpreters will be available at the Tulare forum. For those unable to attend in person, written comments may be submitted to: CPUC Public Advisor, 505 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco, CA 94102, or via email to public.advisor@cpuc.ca.gov. Please refer to proceeding number R.15-03-010 on any written or email correspondence about this proceeding. All public comments received are provided to the CPUC’s Commissioners and the Administrative Law Judge assigned to the case. While a quorum of Commissioners and/or their staff may attend, no official action will be taken. For more information on Public Participation Hearings, please see www.cpuc.ca.gov/PPH.

Since 2016, SHE has worked with the CPUC to identify a dozen disadvantaged communities to partake in ‘energy pilot projects’ that are expected to provide energy cost savings via natural gas line extensions, electrification, community solar or any combination of such. Five of the 12 projects are located in Tulare County in the communities of Allensworth, Alpaugh, Ducor, Seville, and Goshen. The median household income for these homes ranges from a low of \$20,700 in Goshen to \$38,700 in Alpaugh. Seventy percent, or just under 600 households, housing units lack access to natural gas.

Under the CPUC’s proposal, Alpaugh would have the choice of either hooking up to electrical lines or gas lines extended into the community as part of the least expensive project at just under \$1 million. Ducor and West Goshen would be offered home solar systems. The total cost for each of the communities would be more than \$6 million. All of these projects would be fully funded as part of the proposal.

Allensworth and Seville residents would have the option of voting for natural gas connections or a community solar system with a budget of \$3.4 and \$2.9 million respectively. Unfortunately, those figures would only cover half the cost of the project, something Chairman Steve Worthley made note of at the meeting.

“Two of these projects are partially funded, which means they are not funded because there is no fund to draw the other half of the money from,” Worthley said. “If we are looking at those projects, they need to be fully funded.”

SHE will support gathering data, evaluating feasibility, and cost effectiveness of pilot projects. In September, SHE was selected to co-chair the data gathering component of the project, and expects to have an active role in the implementation phase of the pilots. In addition, SHE recently received a \$75,000 donation to support our outreach and energy education work in these communities. These pilot projects and data gathering endeavors will directly inform CPUC decision-makers on the best ways to provide assistance to the hundred plus remaining communities.