

control of energy purchases, the grid's infrastructure will remain in the hands of PG&E.

That's one reason Chico Mayor Randall Stone recently signed a letter that was sent to the CPUC on behalf of more than 50 elected officials. Citing PG&E's repeated safety and service failures, the letter urges a complete public takeover. Stone says a few of Chico's newer housing developments were repeatedly hit by the blackouts, along with neighborhoods in nearby unincorporated areas, while PG&E vaguely suggested the city's downtown might go dark.

"You're looking at the volatility that's injected into the community whenever there's a proposal to shut off power, just from the anxiety it causes alone," Stone said. "This is a community that's already suffering terribly from the kind of chaos that PG&E's infrastructure causes. The outages just make that pain even more acute."

Stone, a longtime financial planner, says he also signed the letter with his fellow mayors and county supervisors for a practical reason.

"I think it's necessary for PG&E to be publicly owned from a financial perspective alone," he said. "It's going to cost \$50-\$60 billion to bring PG&E's infrastructure up to safe standards. That is an extraordinary amount of money. I just don't see how it's possible to do it unless the utility is customer-owned I think the Legislature is eventually going to come to the conclusion that it has to go this way."

Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor agrees and signed on to the letter. While his constituents are largely supplied by Valley Clean Energy, all of their power runs through PG&E's transmission lines and infrastructure and is thus subject to the blackouts. Last June, the small city of Winters in Yolo County was the first area to be hit by an intentional PG&E shut-off. Records indicate that Winters has been covered by every single shut-off since.

"We've been concerned about the captive market for some time," Saylor said of PG&E. "When we see dividends paid year after year to stockholders, and massive bonuses given to executives, it creates uneasiness because they're not making the right investments in the infrastructure, and they're not bringing lines underground. We think the money has been misspent and mismanaged, and there probably needs to be a fundamental restructuring."

For Davis Mayor Brett Lee, signing the letter urging a public takeover was imperative for the future of the state's economy. Though Davis has largely been spared from the blackouts, Lee says Northern California can't remain a leading hub of innovation with the world constantly seeing news stories about power being shut off from the Silicon Valley to the suburbs of the state capital.

"We're supposed to be the high-tech capital of the world, and there's no electricity for a week?" Lee said.

Lee also believes that PG&E's long history of negligence—it's already under federal criminal probation for the 2010 San Bruno gas pipeline explosion that killed eight people—means Californians simply don't have confidence in the company.

"Not every public entity is transparent, or works in the best interest of the community they serve, but more often than not, compared to a private entity, they respond to the public more," Lee said. "In our own backyard we have Sacramento Municipal Utility District, and there's no weird scandals with them PG&E is accountable to their investors, by law. That's their master."

As PG&E's bankruptcy case hangs in legal limbo, leaders including Lee, Saylor and Stone are waiting to see if the governor and CPUC will start moving toward ending corporate ownership.

Yet at Magalia's relief center, many survivors find the idea of PG&E facing a true reckoning difficult to imagine. They also have more immediate concerns. Many are still living in cars and tents. There are still few jobs. Most locals have



Chico Mayor Randall Stone was among the more than 50 city leaders around the state who signed a letter to the California Public Utilities Commission that cites PG&E's failures and urges a takeover of the utility. CN&R FILE PHOTO

seen their friend or family networks vanish, lost to death or displacement.

Abernathy was just assigned a disaster case manager after waiting for more than a year, but says it's not clear what that person can really provide.

"And we keep seeing more of the trees finally dying," she reflected, pointing out to the seared, half-lunar landscape spanning the Ridge. "A lot of us loved living out here because we were surrounded by the trees. With every day, you see another tree die, and another little piece of yourself dies with it." □

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- Must be 18-over to submit

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Send submissions to keepchicoweird@gmail.com. Selected entrants will be notified within a week or so from the deadline.

For more info and updates visit: keepchicoweird.com or facebook.com/keepchicoweird

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Employees: Please tell us three things that make your boss so terrific. Be specific. And also tell us how we can contact him or her. Send nominations with "Best Boss" in the subject line to cnrletters@newsreview.com.



DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION: FEB. 5

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