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Dollars and Daggers in California’s Energy Battles

By FELICITY BARRINGER

In California, a state where government-by-ballot-proposition has been raised to a high art, energy companies are pouring millions of dollars into efforts to protect their interests. The one that has gotten the most attention so far is a push to derail the state’s landmark 2006 law to combat global warming.

Three Texas oil companies have made donations of hundreds of thousands of dollars in an effort to get the measure on the November ballot.

Last week Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger used the occasion of a visit to Serious Materials, a Sunnyvale company that specializes in making buildings (like the Empire State Building) more energy-efficient, to lash out at this attempt to squelch one of the signature accomplishments of his term.

And The San Francisco Chronicle reported Friday that the League of California had Cities rejected a call to undermine the law.

But the hundreds of thousands spent by the oil companies on the effort are dwarfed by the nearly $35 million spent to date by one of the state’s major utilities on a more obscure initiative known as Proposition 16, which California voters will consider in a ballot on June 8. The measure has been
framed in wonderfully contradictory ways by the two opposing factions.

Filings at the California secretary of state’s office show that the measure’s supporters, led by Pacific Gas & Electric, the source of the $35 million, are arrayed under the banner “Yes on 16 / Californians to Protect Our Right to Vote.”

The opponents’ committee goes by the name No on Prop 16, Stop the PG&E Power Grab.

The framing is important because the issue at stake is of the sort that makes voters roll their eyes and wonder why they should care: who gets to buy electricity for resale to consumers.

Proposition 16 would require the approval of two-thirds of the voters in any given jurisdiction for a power authority to be established in competition with the existing provider.

One way to grasp the stakes is to look at the experience of Marin County, a jurisdiction just north of the Golden Gate Bridge that has long prided itself on environmental consciousness.

In February, the Marin Energy Authority contracted with Royal Dutch Shell to purchase renewable power that it could then resell, in competition with PG&E. But PG&E threatened to cut off some power supplies to the authority and offered incentives to some of its Marin customers to stick with PG&E, actions that earned it a rebuke from the state’s Public Utilities Commission.

San Francisco is also exploring the possibility of establishing its own power authority, and there is similar interest in the agricultural areas of the Central Valley, which spend a considerable portion of their electricity bills on pumping or redirecting water for their crops.

Lawsuits have been filed, and the anti-PG&E oratory has escalated; a Facebook group has been formed by the No-on-16 partisans.

The utility, arguing that formation of local power authorities like Marin’s and one planned across the bay in San Francisco could burden taxpayers, has won support from the the California Chamber of Commerce and the state’s Taxpayer Association for passage of Proposition 16.
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