Coalition formed to fight PG&E rate increase

By Ed Pope
Staff Writer

Grass-roots groups in Santa Clara County, rebelling against higher utility rates, will turn their solo acts into a chorus of protest today.

Members of Fed-up Ratepayers and Prevent Higher Utility Charges, the two main consumer groups battling the recent rate increases, are forming a coalition with the De Anza College Students for Economic Democracy, the Welfare Recipients League, Seniors Can Act Together and retirees of Local 715 of Service Employees International Union. They plan to announce the merger at a press conference in Sunnyvale.

They will call the new organization the South Bay Ratepayers Alliance, according to Diane Hudson. The formalities will take place at her Sunnyvale home.

On another front, the state Assembly will conduct a hearing on the issue of utility rates at 7 p.m. today in the Piedmont Hills High School auditorium.

San Jose Assemblyman Dominic Cortese urged residents to attend.

"Let the committee know what (you) think should be done about these outrageous bills," he said.

The Assembly Select Committee on Utility Performance, Rates and Regulation was formed to draft solutions to rising utility rates and to solicit public reaction to utilities legislation. The chairman is Douglas Bosco, D-Occidental.

The South Bay Ratepayers Alliance will have its first countywide meeting at 7 p.m. March 10 in the old countywide administration building at 7 p.m. March 10 in the old county administration building, in the San Jose Civic Center, Hudson said.

"We're looking for ideas and input. We're organizing into one cohesive group.

because the individual doesn't have a "whole lot of power," she said.

The group's objective, she said, is to reduce utility rates to the levels of last Oct. 21. The alliance also intends to educate Pacific Gas & Electric Co. officials in the lifestyles of the poor, to investigate laws that restrict an individual's energy independence and to keep cost overruns for new construction from becoming a part of the rate structure.

Meanwhile, the Gilroy City Council has endorsed a resolution asking the Public Utilities Commission to roll back utility rates.

The Sierra Foothills Community Assistance Project, of Grass Valley, is circulating the petition among cities throughout the state.

The resolution asks the PUC to return utility rates to their January 1981 levels,

"as there are a great many people on fixed incomes who cannot exist with the rate hikes."

The resolution, along with endorsements, will be presented to the Legislature on Monday, according to Houston Spires, executive director of the Sierra Foothills organization.

And in Santa Cruz, People Against Rate Escalation, another citizens' movement sprouting from the roots of recent gas and electricity increases, has its eye on legislative and ballot-initiative measures.

Stuart Wisong, an Aptos resident who teaches at Mount Pleasant High School in San Jose, is spearheading the group, which he says has 2,000 members and is growing by 50 each week.

The group also seeks legislative action taking rate-setting authority away from the PUC and giving it to the Legislature. Wisong said the group expects to have

5,000 signatures on petitions requesting this action by the end of March.

Wisong said his group will participate in a public forum on the issues with State Sen. Henry Mello, D-Monterey, at 7 p.m. Friday at Harbor High School.

"We realize PG&E has a financial problem and has no alternative but to raise rates, but we can't put up with it," Wisong said. "We don't want people to have to make the decision between eating or paying their PG&E bill."

Across the state, the picture is the same. A Southern California lawmaker called Wednesday for the creation of a "Consumers Utility Board," which would represent citizens before the state PUC when rate hikes are proposed. The bill, according to Assemblyman Mel Levine, D-Santa Monica, would "put residential utility customers on an even footing with utility companies and their large industrial customers."