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Can't see for the fog

If you're going to build a huge, interstate gas pipeline, take note from Dominion Resources — the key to success is a powerful PR machine, boatloads of money, and the real trick: obfuscation. If you know how to obscure (confuse, make unclear, be evasive), you're all set.

Dominion has done this, intentionally and not, for more than a year, since it first announced its plans for the 550-mile Atlantic Coast Pipeline last May.

First, it was the unseemly roll-out — calls to county and city officials to let them know they were sending letters to affected landowners about surveying for the pipeline's route. Then another set of letters to correct the first set. All this was combined with a lack of information landowners demanded, and the open houses Dominion hosted where questions were often not answered or information was conflicting.

Meanwhile, other routes were considered, and more letters to landowners went out. Dominion seemed to simultaneously explore different routes and yet publicly say its original route was really the only one being considered.

As the company submitted preliminary information to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, as a prelude to its full application for a certificate to build the project, we were even more confused. Report after report buried data so deeply we couldn't figure out what concern, or whose concern, Dominion was responding to.

Early on, Dominion hired a firm to prove the economic benefits of its project — a key factor in gaining FERC approval.

Following a long review of Dominion's economic claims, we learn this week they cannot even be adequately studied for accuracy. The Southern Environmental Law Center hired Synapse Energy Economics to have a look at reports issued by Chmura and ICF, two firms Dominion used to evaluate the project's numbers. Synapse said Dominion's claims:

- “Present an incomplete accounting,” and
- Assumptions “may not be justified.”
- Methods used were “inadequately explained.”

- Conclusions are “not supported by the evidence.”
- The studies do not make things clear, and some are erroneously presenting data that’s “irrelevant.”
- The reports are “largely inauditable,” and “lack the transparency and verifiable data” needed for independent review.

Synapse concluded, “Such reports, funded by companies with a financial interest in building the ACP, do not provide the useful, objective tools necessary to inform a public decision-making process meant to ensure the public good. Analyses that are included in a productive public discourse should be defensible and have well- defined methodology and assumptions, combined with the use of publicly available information.”

That, we say, is great obfuscation.

It’s bad enough Dominion is socking landowners and local officials in a fog of uncertainty. But what’s more unsettling is the fact that FERC, in reviewing this project, isn’t likely to recognize when it’s been razzledazzled with unclear data and subjective conclusions.

An example of those bothersome conclusions was Dominion’s response to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection’s extensive list of violations by another one of its pipeline projects. A Dominion spokesman told The Recorder that during the West Virginia construction projects the company failed “to meet its own expectations,” but it plans to follow the order and refrain from future violations.

Dominion is a colossal company with the resources to generate this kind of disorienting information and in doing so, it muddies more than the lovely streams its pipeline will cross. The sheer volume of issues and details involved makes it nearly impossible to study every aspect of the project.

The good news is, there are nonprofit groups, regular citizens, and professionals sharing that load, in the form of grassroots efforts to get a handle on the real (clear, transparent, substantiated) effects of this project.

Unfortunately, we believe Dominion will continue to put its significant public relations arm to work on public perception, as it did in stunning fashion in late June, blatantly plopping out a new pro-pipeline energy group, and claiming the need for natural gas will triple over the next 20 years — a claim clearly overblown according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

It has not been easy to counter Dominion at every turn, but we’re fortunate organizations from SELC to the umbrella group, Allegheny Blue Ridge Alliance, are putting their own time and money behind the effort.

Once bitten, twice shy, as the saying goes. Dominion is trying to sell a bill of goods. Trouble is, no one can figure out exactly of what it consists, other than uncertainty.

We think the people of Highland know when to avoid a scam, even in the fog.