

The Recorder

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Dominion argues against delaying project process

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Dominion and its partners are stepping up efforts to block delays in their proposed pipeline project.

Companies proposing the natural gas pipeline crossing Highland have gone on record that they are flatly against requests for federal regulators to extend the environmental scoping process because they claim that doing so would harm them.

Dominion Transmission Inc. and Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC filed a response Monday opposing a motion for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to delay issuing an environmental impact statement and to extend the comment period.

Southern Environmental Law Center, the Shenandoah Valley Network, the Augusta County Alliance, and Appalachian Mountain Advocates asked in a letter dated March 13 that FERC extend the deadline for scoping comments an additional 60 days from April 28 to June 27.

The groups say Dominion has identified more than one alternative route for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline through Highland and produced a map showing the routes illustrating an article about the request for extending the comment period The Recorder published March 19, the day of a two-hour open house that Dominion hosted in The Highland Center.

Dominion said it is no longer considering alternative routes other than one that is being surveyed. Friday, spokesman Frank Mack told The Recorder that “readers came to the (open house) session very confused because of the map” showing more than one alternative route.

“It appears to be a version of the map that the FERC posted ... in February. That map showed all the routes that were under consideration at one time, but not all of them are under consideration today,” Mack said.

He suggested the newspaper republish the Dominion map that ran along with a story on the alternative route that appeared Feb. 19.

“Prior to the January open house, we were no longer pursuing any of these alternatives so it didn’t make sense to highlight them at that time,” Mack said. “So, to say ‘as many as five routes are now on the table in Highland County’ simply isn’t accurate. They were considered last year, but we stopped considering them prior to the open house.”

Mack said Dominion needed “to find an alternate path in case we ran into unforeseen difficulty with the proposed route through” the Monongahela National Forest, “which we have not yet been given permission to survey. We are contacting landowners along MNF 5 (the alternative route) asking permission to survey their properties. We no longer are pursuing the other four alternatives in Highland County,” Mack said.

“As a side note, I suggest you (The Recorder) consider re-running the map you ran last month. . . highlighting the proposed and current alternative routes, which would make it very clear to the several Highland County residents who were confused at last week’s open house,” Mack said.

In response to a request by The Recorder, Mack provided data for a text description of the proposed alternative route that Dominion has decided to pursue.

The western entry point is about 3.5 miles north of the Route 84 state line crossing on Allegheny Mountain. The path passes over Lantz Mountain, to cross Route 84 in Mill Gap about six miles from the state line. The route then goes over Back Creek Mountain and crosses U.S. 220 six miles north of the Bath County line. The corridor crosses Big Valley Road about a mile south of its Mustoe intersection with U.S. 220, and goes over Jack Mountain. The alternative route crosses Bullpasture River Road about nine miles north of the Bath County line.

Dominion mailed letters to owners of 70 parcels along this route in mid-February, two weeks before FERC issued its notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement and opened a scoping period to receive public comments.

FERC spokeswoman Tamara Allen- Young said the announcement of the alternative route was coincidental to the opening of the scoping process, that the comment period was twice as long as usual, and that comments would be accepted after April 28.

Other than what was described as a coincidence of the scoping process and the route announcement, Dominion’s response Monday, opposing the requests to extend the comment period, closely followed Allen- Young’s words and cited an article in The Recorder that quoted her.

“By the close of the scoping period, the commission will have provided ample opportunity for interested participants to comment on the issues they believe the commission should consider in the EIS,” the response states.

“Commission staff has represented that they typically provide a 30-day scoping period for comments on proposed projects; in this instance, the commission is providing twice as much time for interested members of the public to comment. Commission staff has also publicly stated that it will consider comments filed after the April 28 deadline. Finally, participants will have an

opportunity to intervene in the certificate application dockets ... once they are established, file comments on the proposed applications, and submit comments on the EIS itself, when it is issued. Therefore, no commenter will be prejudiced by adherence to the schedule as proposed in the notice.”

Further, the response states, “While public participants will not be prejudiced by adherence to the scoping period proposed in the notice, DTI (Dominion Transmission, Inc.) and Atlantic would be harmed by the requested delay. Extending the public comment period could potentially delay commission action in these proceedings. Any such extension would have adverse effects on DTI and Atlantic, the customers who have executed precedent agreements for pipeline capacity on the projects, and the public interest,” the response states.

Many others have requested extension of the scoping process. Del. Dickie Bell filed a letter Monday asking for a 30-day extension. “I believe it would be extremely difficult for the newly affected property owners to get up to speed on the regulatory process and potential impact on their land in such a short time frame,” he said.

Joining Bell and others in the request was Richard Lambert of Monterey, who is president of the Virginia Speleological Survey, member of the Virginia Cave Board and data manager for the Highland County Cave Survey.

Lambert said the senior geologist with Dominion’s karst assessment contractor, GeoConcepts Engineering Inc., informed him they had not finished the originally designated route and that work has not been begun on any alternative.

“The lack of detailed maps makes it impossible to determine which karst features may be impacted,” Lambert said. “The fact that Dominion’s contractor has not had time to finish the (original) route and the FERC is requiring we respond ... places a bias in Dominion’s favor and greatly questions the accuracy of the FERC environmental impact statement,” Lambert said, in asking for delay or postponement.

In addition to a number of individual landowners across the state, Highlanders for Responsible Development earlier requested an extension, and the Highland Economic Development Authority voted to do the same.