

The Recorder

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Pipeline opponents join forces for fight

Perspective

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER



Rick Webb of the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition explained the group's GIS mapping system, which enables anyone to use layers to create specific, simplified information about areas affected by the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

WEYERS CAVE — They will not give up. Ever.

Those fighting against proposed natural gas pipelines in this region are not alone. They are finding allies, and joining forces in unprecedented numbers for a cohesive, unrelenting, nationwide battle against large-scale pipeline development.

Two major projects — the Mountain Valley Pipeline and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline — have garnered strong opposition in this region. Those fighting against them were brought together for the first time Saturday at Weyers Cave in a pipeline summit, coordinated by the Allegheny Blue Ridge Alliance and co-sponsored by POWHR, Protect Our Water Heritage Rights coalition.



More than 100 people from West Virginia to North Carolina attended a pipeline summit Saturday in Weyers Cave. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

Founded in September 2014, ABRA now consists of 49 organizations, representing a wide variety of local and environmental interests across Virginia and West Virginia, all opposed to Dominion's proposed ACP project designed to cross three states carrying natural gas from West Virginia to North Carolina.

Participants Saturday gathered in the community center to hear a slate of expert speakers, and share ideas in breakout groups for the afternoon.

The Recorder was one of 15 newspapers invited to attend the summit, the first time print media have been welcomed to get an inside look at how these coalitions are organized and sharing strategies. Easily more than 100 people drove from as far as Richmond and North Carolina to learn more about these projects, and how they can be defeated.



"Bold Nebraska" founder Jane Kleeb explained how her group worked for six years to fight the fourth phase of the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which was rejected by President Barack Obama last year. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

They shared horror stories about their properties being invaded. There were tears and anguish over the prospect of having their land taken for private gain. They were retirees and young people, students and researchers, attorneys and businessmen, farmers and small homeowners — in everything from overalls to three-piece suits.

The one characteristic they had in common? Sheer determination.

They came to get educated that day, and the key speakers did not disappoint. They heard from experts on how to show federal regulators the gas to be carried by these new pipelines wasn't needed to fulfill the region's energy needs. They heard from financial experts about how poorly the utilities had studied the negative impacts to land values and local businesses. They heard from Highland's own Rick Webb, and the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition's new creation — a mapping tool with dozens of layers that would help each organization tell their own stories about how the pipeline would affect their land.



Several Bath County residents attended the summit Saturday, including, from left, Anne Bryan, Bill Limpert, and Bert Carlson. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

And they heard from none other than the so-called “Keystone Killer” herself, Jane Kleebe, who managed to pull in support from all walks of life to defeat the proposed Keystone XL pipeline after six years of work.

Kleebe is the founder of “Bold Nebraska,” an advocacy group founded in 2010 that was the leading opponent of the fourth phase of the Keystone pipeline system. Through the group's efforts, that phase was rejected by President Barack Obama in November 2015, and Kleebe explained Saturday how the group used a variety of political and personal strategies to pressure that decision.

Kleebe pointed to Obama's groundbreaking decision to use a climate test to judge any new energy projects. She urged those attending to fight the use of eminent domain, fight for climate tests, and fight for state permits.

Allen Johnson, president of Eight Rivers Council in Pocahontas County, W.Va., spoke to the different attitudes in that state. “West Virginia considers itself an extractive state ... and it's a difficult political thing,” he said. He noted the ACP's effects on the Snowshoe Resort area landowners helped call attention to the project. “These are wealthy, well placed people in a resort community,” he said. “They're concerned about their property values, and they started some meetings.”

Laurie Ardison and Ellen Darden, co-founders of POWHR, explained how they brought together groups opposed to the Mountain Valley Project from multiple counties in Virginia and West Virginia. Ardison is a retired nurse; Darden is a professor at Concord University. They explained how they connected through social media, and brought several groups together. “West Virginia expects to be told they're going to have pipelines or oil projects ... they've been beaten down, and they're frightened,” Ardison said.

Darden pointed out the area of Virginia and West Virginia counties in the southwest region is called a “sacrifice zone.” She stressed the need to fight all pipeline projects, not just move them from one sacrificial area to another.

An economics discussion was led by Greg Buppert of the Southern Environmental Law Center, former utility executive Thomas Hadwin, Spencer Phillips of Key-Log Economics, and Lorne Stockman of Oil Change International.

FERC is not looking closely at “need” when the agency examines applications for gas pipelines, Buppert told the group. “If there’s enough capacity for the gas, FERC looks no further,” he said. “That’s enough need.”

Buppert explained that half the existing pipeline capacity is not used now, and the effort should be toward convincing FERC that new pipeline isn’t needed. SELC’s argument is that with existing capacity, flow reversal (using existing pipe to carry gas south instead of north), and plenty of storage, there is sufficient infrastructure to meet the demand for the foreseeable future.

“Right now, we have to put the facts in the FERC record about need,” he said.

Hadwin, who represents Friends of the Central Shenandoah, agreed. He cited Department of Energy reports that encourage the U.S. to use existing pipelines first, and put more gas in those lines. He noted the only argument for increasing capacity now is to serve more power plants. “There will be 40 percent more new capacity than needed if all the proposed new pipelines are built,” he said, stressing ratepayers will fund these projects by paying more on their electric bills.

Stockman, who researches the oil and gas industry in North America, pointed out one of the key talking points should be about U.S. climate goals. The recent international Paris agreement on climate change set goals to reduce harmful emissions by 80 percent by 2050. New pipelines, he noted, would be long past their lifespan by that time. Stockman said all newly proposed projects should be put to a climate test before they are approved. Such a test would evaluate the impact of new projects as aligned with climate science, evaluating energy supply and demand in light of the goal to limit global warming (see www.ClimateTest.org for more information).

Phillips explained how Dominion overstated the benefits of the ACP using “biased methods” for calculations that are “basically useless beyond one year.”

Dominion is ignoring real costs, and FERC “will not pay sufficient attention,” he said. “If Dominion compensates affected landowners, FERC assumes there are no other impacts, like the neighbors downstream,” he said. FERC policies essentially tell applicants what they need to say, and applicants continue to tell FERC what it wants to hear.

Phillips also demonstrated how the ACP studies on property values fail to make proper comparisons by accounting for landowners in “high consequence areas” and “evacuation zones” from the pipeline.

“We can’t sue FERC until they make a decision,” Phillips said, “so right now, we have to make sure we raise these questions on the record about the issues that will get litigated ... we think shareholders should send a letter to Dominion’s board saying, ‘You should be setting aside money for future lawsuits.’”

Webb, coordinator of the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition, explained the group's project for an online GIS mapping system. It conveys issues surrounding the ACP in simple ways, he said, which is especially important when dealing with state and federal agencies that are short-staffed and overwhelmed. Webb walked through the existing layers of the program, and noted more will be added. It will bring information "to identify areas where erosion control (during pipeline construction) is impossible," he said. "We have to make the case where it just won't work."

See www.pipelineupdate.org for more information about the system.

Following the morning sessions, participants broke into discussion groups on topics including pipeline economics, growing grassroots advocacy, political climate change, Geographic Information Systems, and the need for a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

Other attendees included representatives from All Pain No Gain, Appalachian Mountain Advocates, Appalachian Voices, Augusta County Alliance, Beyond Extreme Energy, Bioquest Solutions, the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Climate Action Alliance of the Valley, Cooper Conservation Advisors, the Cowpasture River Preservation Association, Free Nelson, Friends of Buckingham, Friends of Middle River, Friends of Nelson, Friends of Shenandoah Mountain, Friends of Wintergreen, Highlanders for Responsible Development, Keepers of the Mountains Foundation, Mountain Lakes Preservation Alliance, Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District, Pocahontas County, Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, Preserve Giles County, Preserve Monroe, Preserve Montgomery, Rockbridge Area Conservation Council, Rockfish Valley Foundation, Shannon Farm Association, Shenandoah Valley Network, Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Virginia Wilderness Committee, We Are Cove Point, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, West Virginia Rivers Coalition, West Virginians for Property Rights, Wild Virginia, and Yogaville Environmental Solutions.

The newly formed group Voices from Bath was well represented by several folks, including Anne Bryan, Bert Carlson, John Cowden, Jean Howell, Harold King, and Bill and Lynn Limpert, among others.

Moderator Lew Freeman told those attending that ABRA would gather notes from each discussion and presentation to distribute later.