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Dominion outlines emergency, safety plans

BY MIKE BOLLINGER • STAFF WRITER



Harold King, left, co-chair of the Bath County Local Emergency Planning Committee, talked with Dominion external affairs manager Emmett Toms following Tuesday afternoon's LEPC meeting. Dominion representatives briefed the LEPC on how it planned to work with county emergency services regarding the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline project. (Recorder photo by Mike Bollinger)

HOT SPRINGS — Bath County emergency personnel heard from Dominion Tuesday about its plans to address safety issues surrounding the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

The \$5 billion project would pass through Bath and Highland counties on a 600-mile route from northern West Virginia to southern North Carolina and Hampton Roads.

A Federal Energy Regulatory Commission directive had instructed Dominion to address Bath County's concerns over a lack of information, and whether local responders could access emergencies unrelated to the proposed pipeline during construction. FERC directed Dominion to provide documentation that it consulted Bath County about emergency response procedures.

Tuesday, representatives from Dominion Power briefed members of the Bath County Local Emergency Planning committee on emergency plans during the ACP's construction and operation in order to meet FERC's requirement.

Kevin Zink, Dominion director of pipeline operations, said Dominion would work with local emergency response agencies. Zink said Dominion would host simulations and drills for emergencies if the local agencies wanted those. "We're ready to work with the Bath County groups as far as simulations and drills," he told Local Emergency Planning Committee members. "We will follow local emergency protocols."

Zink said the pipeline slated to come through Bath would be of 42-inch steel pipe, .6 to .8 inch thick.

Pipelines are under the jurisdiction of several agencies for safety purposes, he said, including the U.S. Transportation Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

All welds along the pipeline would be checked with X-ray equipment, Zink continued. Once the pipeline is in place, there will be weekly, monthly and annual inspections. Every seven years, equipment is run through the pipeline to check for defects, according to Zink.

"The largest problem we have with pipelines is third-party damage. We will look to involve local contractors so they know where exactly where things are and how to dig around them," Zink said.

Pipeline operators must meet mandated federal operator qualification standards, he said. There are annual meetings with local emergency responders, law enforcement and other agencies in every county the pipeline crosses. "We have a security group that will work with local law enforcement," Zink said.

Dominion external affairs specialist Carla Picard said Dominion already operates about 12,000 miles of natural gas pipeline. Zink said pipelines are monitored at all times from a gas control center in Bridgeport, W.Va. Every 15 miles, there will be remotely operated valves that can be closed if there is a problem with the line, he said. Dominion uses satellite and microwave systems to operate the valves, and these systems have alarms in case either they fail or there is a problem.

The pipe will be coated internally and externally to prevent corrosion, Zink noted. Every month, Dominion will fly the pipeline route by helicopter and use infrared gas detection equipment to check for problems as well, Zink added.

He emphasized all federal and state guidelines related to the pipeline would be followed.

Barry Marshall, chief of the Williamsville Volunteer Fire Department, asked what would happen if the remote system for closing the valves failed and whether emergency responders would be trained to close the valves.

Zink said in his 37 years in the pipeline business, he had never had a situation where an emergency responder had to close a valve.

The nearest manned facilities would be compressor stations in Buckingham County and Roanoke Rapids, N.C., Zink said. He said he would arrange site visits to the compressor stations once they're in operation, if local officials desired.

“Our emergency plan deals with a myriad of different things. We work with every agency we can including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security,” he said.

LEPC co-chair Harold King said while some individual members are “not enthusiastic” about the pipeline, the committee as a whole had the responsibility to prepare for it. “We are going on the assumption (the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) will give approval and it will be built and become operational,” King said.

King said the county's emergency operations plan and hazardous materials plan would need to be updated to include the pipeline. “We need to identify the possible issues and react in time to get our plans updated and in place,” he said.

Picard said the most common question Dominion gets is how water sources would be protected in light of the large amount of karst topography in the area the pipeline would cross.

Construction engineer Colin Olness said landowners within 500 feet on either side of the center line of the route were being contacted.

He said four tests, one each quarter, would be performed on wells and springs to test for water quality and quantity in order to establish a baseline on what kind of water supply people have. “If a landowner has an issue with a well, Dominion and the ACP will respond within 24 hours. We will make sure people have water,” Olness said.

Olness said temporary tanks would be installed short-term, and if necessary, Dominion would install a new well.

King said in some cases, 500 feet from the route center wouldn't be enough. He pointed out sediment could alter underground water flow and affect people a significant distance downstream.

Dominion's karst specialists, Olness said, felt confident about the 500-foot radius. “We have construction mitigation plans. There will be no fueling within 700 feet of a karst feature. We are saying we will not let contaminants in the water,” he said. “It is the ACP's responsibility to respond and get water to people. If there is permanent damage to a well, the ACP will drill a new well.”

He said there had been at least one instance where a landowner's water supply was from a spring, and that landowner was more than 500 feet from the route, but the spring was within 500 feet. In that case, he said, and in cases where springs are involved, studies would be done so water supplies would not be affected. “There are unique cases, and we will address each of these in turn,” Olness said.

King said many roads in Bath would not handle the type of vehicles needed to move equipment during construction. Emergency services agencies are concerned that if roads are damaged or blocked, they wouldn't be able to respond to calls, he explained.

Zink said Dominion could generate a local emergency operations plan for the project.

Olness said contractors would evaluate roads before construction started. That process started this week, he said. When haul routes are established to proposed access roads and pipe yards, contractors will then have to look at the roads. "We have to have the necessary permits from (the Virginia Department of Transportation)," he said. "Once haul plans are in place, we have to do a traffic management plan to make sure we don't impede traffic."

Construction manager Greg Park said contractors have to take into account the load a road would support. They also will estimate the wear and tear on roads, he said. "We talk with VDOT, and if we need to, we will build a road up to standards or we will fix it as we go along," he said.

Once large construction equipment is on the right of way, it would move along that right of way, Park said. "You will see truck traffic for pipe. We can only put so many pieces on a truck. Pipe has to get to where we store it and to the right of way," he said. "We will communicate with you all. You know these roads better than we do."

External affairs manager Emmett Toms said meetings would have to be held with VDOT in order to receive permits to haul. "We did large electrical projects in Augusta and Rockbridge. In Augusta in particular, they have better roads than when we started," he said.

Park said contractors would take video of roads where needed. In addition, he said depending on potential impact, the ACP would be required to pay a bond to VDOT with the amount determined by that impact. He said some impact on the roads was unavoidable. "There will be damage to the roads. They're not designed for this kind of traffic," he said.

Trooper Todd Brendel of the Virginia State Police said the VSP has worked with Dominion many times. "I can assure you they will have all the permits they need. I have all the faith in the world in them," he said.

As far as emergency services response, Park said the ACP and contractors would meet with agencies to see what equipment and training they have. He said they would learn where landing zones for medical helicopters are and where the primary routes used by emergency responders are. One example, he said, would be whether responders had off-road vehicles or if the ACP needed to provide for that.

Olness said contractors would set up "medipods" to deal with issues they can in order to lessen impact on emergency responders.

"VDOT's not going to let us close down roads," Toms said.

Olness said there would be detailed conversations about what equipment is available locally. If necessary, the ACP would have to "bring that to the table," he said. Training would also be provided where needed, including trench rescue training, he said.

Williamsville District supervisor Stuart Hall, the county's emergency services director, said Dominion did everything it said it would do and more during construction of the pumped storage facility in Mountain Grove. Hall noted the pipeline would bring about \$630,000 per year for 20 years to Bath. "They're not bad neighbors," he said.

Park said construction is expected to begin about a year from now.

Picard presented a timeline that estimated a draft environmental impact statement from FERC in fall or winter of this year, a final EIS in spring 2017, with a FERC decision to follow, construction in 2017 and 2018, with the pipeline becoming operational in 2018.

Bath County is slated to see construction in 2018. Park said there would be about 800- 900 people involved in construction during peak periods and another 100-150 working with inspections. The peak period would be about six months, he said. Land clearing would begin in late fall of 2017.

Toms noted there has been concern about the size of the pipe. "We have had 42-inch pipe in Virginia since the late '70s. There is one from Appomattox to Northern Virginia. It is used in many states in a lot of applications," he said.

In case anyone at the LEPC meeting was not familiar with the project, Picard gave an overview. She said Dominion, along with Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas Distribution and AGL Resources were the principals of the ACP project and are the four largest customers of the natural gas the ACP would source.

Picard said natural gas is needed because of a shift from coal-powered power plants to those that use the cleaner-burning natural gas. She said Dominion does use some renewable energy sources. "We love renewables, and we have multiple wind and solar projects. They make up a very small part of the electricity used today," Picard said.

Natural gas demand is projected to rise 165 percent between 2010 and 2035, she continued. The ACP would run for about 600 miles in West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina. The pipe would be 42-inch in West Virginia and Virginia and 36-inch in North Carolina, she said.

In addition to the compressor stations in Buckingham and North Carolina, there will be a third in Lewis County, W.Va. Picard said since the application was submitted to FERC, there had been "literally hundreds of miles of changes to the route."

She said Dominion had met with thousands of landowners as well as federal, state and local agencies to determine where the route could go. "We're not done," Picard said.

Dominion is working with FERC as the agency prepares the environmental impact statement, Picard said. "We're continuing to work with them as well as stakeholders along the route to improve it any way we can to minimize impact to the extent we can," she said.