

The Recorder

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Decision on easement conversion for pipeline tabled

By John Bruce • Staff Writer

RICHMOND — Thursday, Feb. 9, the Virginia Outdoor Foundation voted to defer consideration of Dominion’s application to swap portions of open-land conservation easements with Hayfields Farm and another property in Nelson County to expedite construction of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

VOF chair Stephanie Ridder convened the board’s open session after meeting behind closed doors less than 10 minutes to discuss potential litigation and real estate negotiation. She cited numerous emails from the public were being received “as we meet.”

“It’s our consensus to keep this matter open,” Ridder said.

The motion from board member Beth Obenshain to defer carried unanimously after a long day of hearing overwhelming opposition from an audience of 100 people who often applauded those who spoke against the application.

During morning public comments and remarks by affected landowners, 12 people spoke in favor of Dominion’s application and 37 voiced opposition.

Opponents included Bath Planning Commission chair John Cowden and Augusta County Supervisors chair Tracy Pyles.

Landowners of Berry, Revercomb and Bright conservation easements lands expressed support on prerecorded videos.

Robert Koontz voiced his opposition on video.

“If approved, I will go to court,” said Normandy Capital LLC owner Chuck Burke. “I don’t want to have to do it.”

Many speakers shared their sympathy with the VOF board for facing tremendous legal pressure from Dominion and from opposing landowners and conservation groups.

“You’re between a rock and a hard place,” Sierra Club’s Kirk Bowers told the board. “Dominion will challenge you if you don’t approve, and we will challenge you if you do.”

The board met in closed session two hours after hearing public comments and before hearing an afternoon presentation by Dominion before an audience that shrank to less than half its size that morning.

Southern Environmental Law Center executive director Greg Buppert told The Recorder that VOF should say no to the application. “Staff has been clear that Dominion should avoid easements.”

See next week's Recorder for details.