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Mountaintop removal worries neighborhood

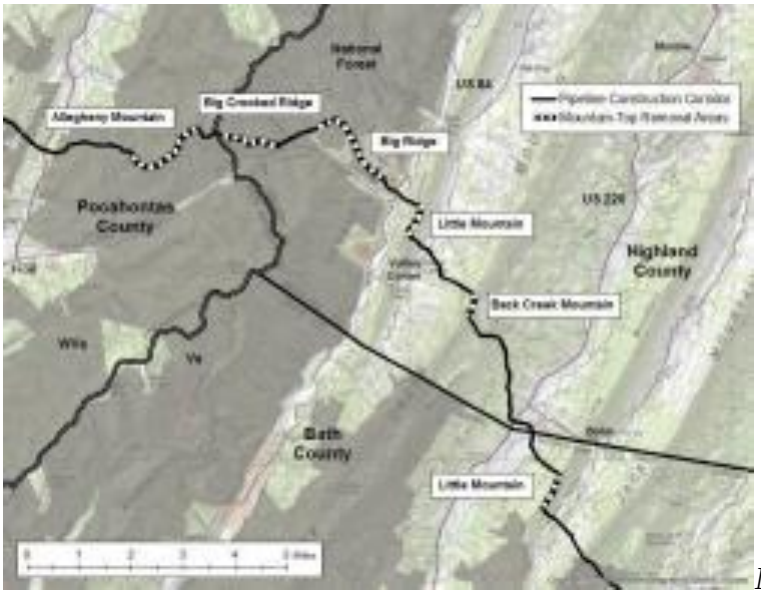
BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

The current route crosses this karst terrain at the foot of Little Mountain. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

MILL GAP – He's for the proposed pipeline, but not the route.

David Blanchard has known about the GWNF-6 route of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline since it was announced. But it wasn't until two months ago he learned from nearby landowners that pipeline builder Dominion would remove a quarter to a third of his family's pristine mountaintop in view from his front porch, towering over sheep grazing in his bucolic front yard. His mother's home sits across the road.

"It's gotten me engaged," Blanchard said of Dominion's plan to reroute the pipeline study corridor from a path along Back Creek to climb Little Mountain in southwestern Highland County, the same name of a mountain in northern Bath County likewise planned for partial mountaintop removal and replacement.



Map depicts the six mountain ridges planned for flattening. (Courtesy Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition)

The two Little Mountain ridges are among six planned for flattening. Four are in Highland, including Big Crooked Ridge, Big Ridge, Little Mountain and Back Creek Mountain. Then, there are Allegheny Mountain in Pocahontas County, W.Va., and Little Mountain in Bath.

As chair of the Highland County Board of Supervisors, Blanchard favors the idea of the pipeline crossing Highland from a financial standpoint because Dominion would pay the county more than 3 percent of its roughly $7.1 million budget annually in property taxes. “When I’m looking at the budget this year, I’m asking where’s the money coming from. It gets harder and harder to say no to projects because bills keep going up.”

At the same time, Blanchard is optimistic about correcting the proposed pipeline route. Of Dominion, he said,


With Little Mountain in the background, “It’s rugged land. Back here, it’s all flood plain and pasture land,” said area resident David Blanchard.

“You’ve got to hold their feet to the fire.”

Blanchard spread paper pipeline maps on his kitchen table and explained what he has learned so far.

“Dominion saw this route as more viable, to cross the mountain. Landowners tried to get them back to the original route (along Back Creek), but Dominion said it was a better route from an environmental standpoint. It’s my family’s land the pipeline is partially on. It’s on two miles of their property.

“I’m not against the pipeline, but I’m willing to work on asking questions about what’s their thought process of putting the pipe through a neighborhood versus a green space. The original route would be along the creek. Now it’s climbing the mountain and cutting down the ridge top. I’m against this route,” Blanchard said.

 *Water from this pipe sustains Valley Center area residents in times of drought.)*

The proposed route’s centerline would cross Valley Center Road in a cave-and-karst area with about 30 homes within a one-mile radius, and six full-time residents within 250 yards.

Questions about the project coincide with the approaching April 6 deadline for public comments about the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s draft Environmental Impact Statement.

“I want people to understand this particular part of the project’s impact is going to be having on people. When you have a county as unpopulated as Highland, why would you put the pipe through a densely populated area? Anywhere else, it wouldn’t be considered dense, but for Highland, it’s dense. There used to be a post office, stores, like a village. Why doesn’t Dominion come down the national forest? Because it’s easier to grab private property,” he said.

An orange marker outlines the pipeline study corridor. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

"There are other routes. This just clicked. The whole mountaintop removal situation dispels argument. It's going to impact property values," Blanchard said of the ridge-top explosion practice linked to economic decline and reduced life expectancy.

With a four-legged friend in the back and a reporter strapped in the passenger's seat, Blanchard drove his station wagon on a tour of the proposed pipeline route through Mill Gap and Valley Center. He headed from his home on Lower Back Creek Road to Route 84, traversing the gap dividing the ridges of Lantz Mountain and Little Mountain, through which Back Creek and Townsend's Draft flow. He pointed to orange pavement markers painted by Dominion surveyors delineating the roughly tenth-of-a-mile-wide study corridor crossing the highway.

"A lot of people don't know what the marks are on this road," Blanchard said.

From Route 84, the route would then cross Townsends Draft southeast of the highway, near Lower Back Creek Road.

"They (Dominion) prefer flat land in front of a mountain and not water at the base of a mountain," he said, pointing to a pasture at the base of Little Mountain. "It avoids them having equipment in the creek. It's rugged land. Back here, it's all flood plain and pasture land, traditionally with lots of hunt camps."

Turning around and heading back on Route 84, Blanchard forked left on Lower Back Creek Road. On the right is mainly George Washington National Forest property, and Bird family land spans the road on the left for a little over a mile. Blanchard then turned left on Valley Center Road and spotted a juvenile bald eagle soaring over another pasture to the left.

"The greatest concern is the people get- ting water off this mountain." Blanchard pointed to a white PVC pipe spouting a stream of clear water on the left side of the road, south of the centerline. "In the summer when there's a drought, all the neighbors rely on this spring to fill their water tanks."

He pointed out a basketball-sized opening in a rock formation on the right about 100 yards north. "After the earthquake (in Mineral, 2011), water flowed brown out of there." But water from the pipe remained clear, he added.

A little farther up Valley Center Road, Blanchard said, “What dawned on me was the scope and impact of mountaintop removal. It’s really what alarmed me. The construction zone that’s going to be in here is beyond what anybody thinks about this pipeline.

“Where are they putting that material? How many cubic tons of material are going to be removed to put the pipeline in, and what does that construction site look like?” Blanchard asked.

Continuing on Valley Center Road with Little Mountain on the left, Blanchard noted, “There are springs coming out all over the mountain.” There, pastures support beef production. Farmers rely on a continuous supply of clean water for their herds. The spring-waters emerge from a vast underground natural limestone drainage network called karst, caves and sinkholes.

While driving across the proposed pipeline centerline on Valley Center Road, Blanchard said, “There’ are sinkholes all through here. It’s all karst. They’ve sewn this route through houses and sinkholes. Maybe sinkholes are fine, but houses aren’t. If you can put it someplace else, then why chance it? There are six farms along this road that have been here for over 100 years. The landowners have been trying to work with them (Dominion). They (landowners) haven’t been putting up resistance but are getting closer. There’s a heightened awareness.”

After turning around and heading south, Blanchard pointed to a rock outcrop atop Little Mountain. “They say they’re going to replace the mountaintop after removing it. How can you replace a rock outcrop?

“But that’s not a problem,” he quipped.

Some neighbors have asked why Dominion doesn’t cross the ridge on Allegheny Mountain, Blanchard said.

He plans to contact Dominion about reducing the environmental and cultural impacts by rerouting the proposed pipeline’s path along Back Creek instead of crossing Little Mountain. As it stands, “On a scale from one to ten, you’re close to a nine on impacting the water source by going close to homes instead of down the valley next to Back Creek.”

The two Little Mountains share similarities besides their names, pipeline opponent Bill Limpert noted. His retirement home sits across Little Valley from the other Little Mountain in northern Bath. He shares Blanchard’s concerns over water pollution and he, too, wonders how a rock mountaintop can be restored after removal.

“I think this is a major issue, and one well worth getting out to the public, and not just our local public, but the large metropolitan areas as well. The only place for the debris to go would be over the very steep sides of the ridge. That will actually increase the slope above and beyond what it is now, and that will be unconsolidated material that will be very erosion and landslide prone,” he said.

“The amount of material could be determined by the steepness and the length of the affected ridge, and we may try to get an estimate on that. The draft EIS dismisses this issue. In fact, for Little Mountain, east of Route 220, they specifically state that from a scenic values issue, that since the ridge top is at about 3,200 feet elevation that the visual impact from anywhere below that elevation would be insignificant, because you couldn’t see the top of the mountain.

"We all know the top of the mountain is visible now, and certainly would be after it is lowered and flattened. It would be the same angle as an average height person standing in their room 10 feet from the wall and looking at the line where the wall meets the ceiling … it's clearly visible and any alteration to it, especially lowering a portion of it, would stand out as an eyesore. FERC uses the excuse that the remaining trees on the side slopes would cover the view of the excavated, denuded, and flattened mountain, but that doesn't make sense considering the very steep slopes, the fact that some of these trees would likely die from sediment and debris pushed over the side, and of course, no leaves on the trees for half of the year.

"The Natural Gas Act requires that pipelines avoid or minimize impacts to scenic areas. Minimize is defined as reducing to the maximum extent possible. FERC's suggestion to Dominion to reduce the permanent right of way to 50 feet from the current 75 feet would not effectively minimize the impact, especially since the temporary right of way in these areas would likely be widened from 125 feet to 150 or more due to the steep slopes," Limpert continued.

"It is also important to consider that winching platforms or structures would almost certainly be placed at the top of these mountains to pull heavy equipment up and down the steep slopes. I am not familiar with winching stations, or if they leave a permanent structure in place. I'm glad (Blanchard) is waking up to the horror this project would bring to our area in Highland and Bath (including) Little Mountain east of Route 220, Back Creek Mountain west of Route 220, and Little Mountain near Mill Gap and Valley Center near the West Virginia line. They would all be highly visible, and folks traveling on Route 220 and Route 84 would see two flattened mountain at the same time.

"I am not too familiar with mountaintop removal, which may be more extensive, but this mountaintop flattening is in the same ballpark in terms of pollution potential, landslides, and loss of scenic beauty," he said. "Incidentally, the sediment controls planned for this project — silt fence, hay bales, diversion berms, and revegetation — are almost useless considering the long, very steep mountain slopes, and nearly 20 square miles of soil disturbance for the entire project. I've never seen such lax controls. In fact, silt fence is only designed to control sheet flow over very short distances. It cannot control flow over long distances, and it cannot control concentrated flows that diversion berms create, or are created as flows come together as they travel downslope."

Limpert's professional background is in environmental quality management on the state level in Maryland.

While similar, the partial flattening of Allegheny ridges is technically not the same as mountaintop removal, a phrase that conjures up the worst of Appalachian environmental disasters imaginable. That's because less than 500 feet would be removed, explained Joe Lovett, who has focused national attention on the devastation caused by mountaintop removal coal mining, as executive director of Appalachian Mountain Advocates. "There will be significantly less" removal, Lovett said. To verify that, he has hired an engineer to calculate the amount of spoils from the flattening of mountaintops during pipeline construction. He said the numbers would be ready by or before the April 6 FERC draft EIS public comment deadline.

The draft environmental impact statement does not mention the "swell factor," a construction term defined as the ratio of the weight or volume of loose excavated material to that of the same material before excavation, Lovett said. "If they just mound it up, it's going to wash off."

Mountaintop removal coal mining has been the most widely practiced mining method in central Appalachia and is faulted for the industry's decline. Explosives are used to remove up to 400 vertical feet of mountain to expose underlying coal seams. The practice has destroyed an estimated 500 mountains, polluted more than 1,000 miles of headwater streams similar to Back Creek and Little Valley Creek, both headwaters of the James River. The mining method eliminated portions of America's richest ecosystems. Studies tie mountaintop removal to birth defects, diseases, life expectancies and economies similar to those of third-world countries, as shown on http://ilovemountains.org/the-human-cost/ study-summaries.

The World Health Organization found life expectancy is more than 81 years for men in wealthy Fairfax County, compared to only about 64 years in McDowell County, W.Va., ravaged by poverty and drug trafficking in the wake of a vanishing coal mining industry. Male life expectancy there trails that of Nicaragua, Central America's poorest nation, at 71 years. By contrast, life expectancy is about 76 years for Highland and Bath men, according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.