

The Recorder

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2017-04-06 / Top News

County weighs in on planned pipeline

By John Bruce • Staff Writer

MONTEREY — Permanent ridgetop deforestation. Development on slopes exceeding 25 percent.

Both concepts — key to the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline — contradict the Highland County Comprehensive Plan, Dominion employees were told last week while pitching the project.

Highland would serve as Virginia's gateway for the proposed 600-mile, \$5.1 billion interstate gas pipeline.

The county bills itself for its attractiveness to second home buyers as an economic engine, county attorney Melissa Dowd said, pointing out pristine waters and tree-lined ridges are part of the comprehensive plan's language. "The comprehensive plan says slopes over 25 percent are unsuitable for development," Dowd said during a sometimes-tense two-hour question-and-answer session March 23 between Dominion managers and county supervisors.

"Landowners are already compromised," supervisors chair David Blanchard told the Dominion delegation, referring to the Valley Center neighborhood. He noted water was the greatest concern because the terrain is karst. "We're trying to see if there's an alternative."

"Water and karst are our top concern," construction manager Greg Park said. The company has done all the studies it could to be proactive. "We use desktop surveys and LIDAR," Park said, adding the company follows up with site visits to use electric resistivity imaging and other means to find voids. "We're going to be able to mitigate," Park said.



"At a certain elevation you get a sandstone cap on (a mountain) Park said. "Typically a ridge is least impactful." (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Dowd said the draft Environmental Impact Statement refers to ERI, but doesn't say what the company does with the information. "We do have some (where) we haven't completed the ground surveys," Park said.

"When you're talking about ridgetop development, the trees collect the water for the little springs," supervisor Harry Sponaugle said. "Years down the road, you're going to have problems."

"Our karst guys have done extensive studies to see where that water's coming from," Park replied.

Supervisor Kevin Wagner asked about Dominion's discussion with the state Department of Environmental Quality. Park said there has been a lot of discussion. "We're getting our drawings to them."

Dominion manager of external affairs Emmett Toms remarked, "They (DEQ) don't have enough manpower for this project."

Dominion would hire an environmental firm of DEQ's choice at Dominion's expense. Toms earlier commented pipeline workers from Highland attended the company's construction expo.



Toms said Dominion would videotape Highland roads and restore them to as good or better condition after work is done. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Carla Picard, another manager of external affairs, opened the meeting with supervisors by giving a slide show stating Dominion and its prospective lead contractor, Spring Ridge Constructors, have more than 200 years of experience building pipelines in mountainous terrain. "Safety is the most important aspect of the project," Picard said.

Blanchard said workers have to be union on this project. "There will definitely be some non-union opportunities," Picard replied.

Toms commented, "We've had gas lines in this area longer than we've been around."

"Environmental regulations will continue to be focused on reducing greenhouse gases," Picard said, adding that electric power distributors and gas distribution companies are the main drivers for the proposed pipeline.

"Most people know co-ops get their electricity from Dominion, and costs will go down," Picard said.

“Is that a guarantee?” Dowd retorted. “We’d like to know if we would benefit from lower costs from Shenandoah Valley Electric and BARC.”

Picard said consumers across the state would save \$243 million a year.

“A lot of people say there’s no 42-inch pipeline in Virginia,” Toms said, referring to the Transco pipeline buried under I-64.

No one mentioned the Transco pipeline explosion in 2008 north of Appomattox, which blackened acres of rural farmland, took out homes and injured five people. No one was killed in the blast, caused by external corrosion the industry has since worked to correct.

Dominion meets with localities at least once a year, Picard said, adding Dominion was setting up meetings with local emergency planning committees. Highland and Bath counties together would see \$5.8 million in tax money the first eight years of operation. The bulk of construction would be in 2018.

Picard showed a brief video depicting the company’s experience with karst terrain and showing a karst expert saying he didn’t think construction would have any effect on wells or springs.

Blanchard asked how much water would be used for hydrostatic testing. “We don’t have that much.”

Pipeline engineering manager Brittany Moody replied the company is in the process of developing the hydrostatic test. A million-gallon tank near the intersection of Routes 84 and Route 600 would be filled over several months. “We may run (water) through the pipeline. We may truck in wa- ter,” Moody said.

Wagner asked if lay-down yards were sited in Highland and suggested if they were in the middle of the county, then there would be major wear and tear on roads. Park responded that U.S. 250 would be the primary hauling route. There would be two lay-down yards in Highland — one at Jack Mountain Village, and another behind the VDOT yard in McDowell. Both are more than 10 miles from the proposed route.

Toms said Dominion would videotape the roads and restore them to as good or better condition. Park said there would be a bond system with VDOT. “We know we’ll tear some (roads) up,” Toms said.

The primary contractor yard for this area would be in Frost, W.Va.

In response to Dowd’s question, Toms said conditional use permit applications would be submitted in the next couple of months.

Blanchard said landowners are frustrated about the time lines of work activities and how wide the access roads would be.

Wagner asked if Dominion could incorporate avoiding work during the Maple Festival into its plans.

Tree clearing would start on eight miles of right of way in Highland next spring, Park said. The yards would be kept open to fix anything that needs it for five years. The contractors would have warranties.

Sponaugle asked how long the pipe sections were. Forty feet, Park said.

“That would be fair,” Park said to Blanchard’s question if Highland is looking at a two-year construction window. The busiest time would be a three-to-four month timeframe.

Wagner asked where would Dominion house the 600-800 workers assigned to Highland. The majority would be at Snowshoe and would commute to Frost, where they would be transported by bus to the worksite.

“Six hundred people is a lot of folks,” Blanchard said. “What about emergency services?”

Park replied Dominion would need to assess local services and logistics and have an open conversation about what the company would bring to the table. “We’d lean on you guys for first responder to come in. Contractors have their own security. It is kind of scary when you bring in folks from out of town.”

Wagner said the reason supervisors asked for the meeting was because of budget preparations. “We have a pretty limited amount of pocket change.”

“If you don’t have the services, we’d have to provide them,” Toms said.

Blanchard asked what a work week was. “Our initial letter to (the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) said we were a sleepy little town.”

Park said work would go on 10 hours a day, six days a week, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Wagner said there was some concern about transient drug use. “Is there a notable problem?”

“I don’t know,” Park replied. “I never thought it was a problem. This is a professional grade job. They’re drug tested. If there’s any kind of incident, they’re tested immediately. There’s a lot of risk. I’m not saying there won’t be a problem. There’s pipeliners who live here right in this county. You can never say never. Do we think it’s a huge problem? I say no.”

“There’s more drug problems from locals,” Toms said. On one project he recalled there were 27 applicants who failed tests before one passed.

Blanchard asked about ridgetop removal. “How do you go about doing that? I heard you are removing a third of the mountaintop and putting it back. This is rock, not dirt, (as) a layer of boulders going up.”

Engineering construction group member Colin Olness said Dominion has hired GeoConcepts to study streams and steep slopes. Anything over 30 percent is considered steep. More than 400 locations along the pipeline route require analysis. “It’s a proactive approach,” Olness said.

That triggered a series of questions.

Wagner asked for a description of a trench plug. “It’s a detention pond concept,” Olness said. “Our best-in-class measures are geared to controlling runoff.”

“Can a trench plug handle three inches of rain in an hour?” Wagner asked. “I’m trying to figure out what it’s built to accommodate.”

“We’ve had more than one 100-year event in one year,” Dowd noted. “You take down trees on ridgetops. How do you grow grass on boulders?”

“What does the construction site look like on the mountain? You have a ten-foot-wide ridge and you need a 150-foot wide work area,” Blanchard said.

“Where does all that (rubble) go? We’re trying to wrap our minds around that,” Wagner said. “It’s a constant topic of conversation. We’re trying to grasp that.”

“I heard you’d take it all the way down and build out a work area,” Blanchard said. “I don’t see how you can get rocks to stay on a 30 percent slope.”

Park replied, “Most karst is at the bottom. At a certain elevation you get a sandstone cap on it. Typically a ridge is least impactful. The ridges run in the wrong direction from where we want to go. We want to hit a steep slope perpendicular. We go straight up.

“The idea was it makes sense to be in a valley, but there’s a lot of karst. We keel a sandstone cap on top with 150-foot width is nominal. We’ll have to excavate quite a bit of material. We build up our spoil from the ditchline. We have to build a catch,” Park said.

Blanchard asked what would happen if a boulder got away and busted through a fence.

“We’d be responsible for fixing any damage, and we’d try to retrieve (the boulder) or reach an agreement with the landowners,” Park said. Blanchard said Dominion is a big company and wondered about the process in such situations. The company will have FERC inspectors on site and then there’s the FERC hotline, Dominion officials said.

Blanchard wondered how the ridge top gets restored. Moody said the company is required to return the ridge to its original contour, back to the original shape. Blanchard asked with so little soil how could grass grow?

“We’re required to let it grow,” Moody said. “We add a lot of nutrients, lime, fertilizer. It’s amazing how much dirt is in there. We’d hunt up as much dirt as we can.”

Blanchard questioned what a day of blasting consists of. Park said the state has a set of parameters, and the pipeline excavation blasting is done with low charges, eight to ten feet at a time. “It’s very precise. You might see the ground heave a little bit.” Other methods include hydraulic hammers. “There are multiple ways. I think you’ll see all applications here. It’s (blasting is) not like National Geographic. It’s not something spectacular,” Park said.

Dowd mentioned the draft EIS says Dominion would test water within a corridor around the proposed pipeline. She asked who pays for the testing. Moody said the testing is voluntary, Dominion would pay and the corridor is 1,000 feet wide.

Dowd asked about a landowner’s recourse if their water goes muddy or goes away. If it does, and the problem is related to Dominion, then the company would bring in a consultant and put in place a damage plan, they said. Dominion is looking at contractors for performing such investigations. “We would get you water while we are doing the investigation,” Park said.

Wagner noted homesteads were established based on access to dependable water sources. Eliminating them decreases land value.

“You guys picked the most dense neighborhood,” Blanchard chided. “Putting in a pipeline shouldn’t cause any problems. That’s the hitch. When you raise the potential of harm to people, the burden should be on you all. Giving someone water is not the same” as having a reliable stream. “The water is the real issue here. I can’t imagine the truck traffic,” he said.