

The Recorder

IN THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, SINCE 1877.

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Things are getting real around here

Dominion Resources, which plans to construct an interstate gas pipeline through part of southern Highland, came before the county board last week — three months after a draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project was issued in late December.

Finally, they were given an audience with Dominion officials to ask some questions they've posed before, and more specific questions that have not been addressed until now.

Of course, the answers were not satisfactory, the way we see it.

Notably, this was the first time we heard the county tell Dominion that its proposed project did not fit our comprehensive plan. Because it would be built on slopes exceeding 25 percent, and would permanently deforest ridge tops, among other things, the project is contrary to the county's publicly vetted and agreed upon plan for guiding development.

This is a critical point — not just for the ongoing discussions about permitting construction, but also because it represents a legal challenge to the applications from Dominion to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation for converting conservation easements where the pipeline would cross.

The process for such conversions, under state law, requires an applicant to show such a conversion would be in line with a locality's comprehensive plan. Clearly, the county says it will not — that point needs to reach VOF before it makes its final decision in June.

But for Highland residents, here's what should truly give you pause: We now understand from Dominion that 600-800 pipeline workers will be based at Snowshoe, W.Va., and they will travel daily by bus to and from Jack Mountain Village in Monterey, and a landing area near VDOT headquarters in McDowell to get to work sites some 10 miles farther from those places — including during winter months.

Let's think about that. With a population hovering around 2,300 in this county, that's equivalent to a third of our entire residents traveling one of only two main arteries into this county, for 10 hours a day, six days a week, for about two years.

That doesn't include the heavy equipment travel, or the fact that equipment will also traverse Route 84 and several secondary passageways, many of which can barely accommodate two vehicles passing. Dominion managers gave a nod to how that would affect our roads. "We know we're going to tear some up," one said.

It's safe to say our visiting scenic tourists will not find their Sunday drives very pleasant for a while. Nor will our resident commuters. Nor will our school bus drivers. Nor will motorcycle enthusiasts.

Traffic safety will be compromised, to say the least. And we still aren't sure how major events like the Maple Festival will be affected, although supervisors tried to find out.

As we report this week, Dominion made a point of stressing a pipeline the same size — 42 inches in diameter — already exists in Virginia, under Interstate 64, but they failed to mention that, due to corrosion, the line exploded in 2008 near Appomattox, taking out homes and injuring five. Dominion representatives didn't put anyone's mind at ease about emergency services, or the hazards of living near its proposed line.

County supervisors had several other good questions about how the landscape would be put back to original terrain after construction, and where Dominion would obtain the millions of gallons of water it needed to test the pipe. The answers were simplified and non-specific: Don't worry about it. We've done this before. Our contractors have warranties. The workers are drug-tested. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has a hotline for any landowners who experience problems. We'll get you water if we mess up your spring or well.

How comforting.

Here's another thing that should give us pause: The Department of Environmental Quality, Dominion told the board, doesn't have enough manpower for this project.

Accordingly, Dominion said, it will hire an environmental firm of DEQ's choosing, and pay for it.

We have said for two years that DEQ has been dragging its heels, and deferring to federal authority, when it should, instead, use existing laws to assert its own authority in protecting state waterways and the environment. We already know the agency feels hamstrung, and we've urged our governor and pipeline cheerleader to fix that problem and arm DEQ with the resources it needs to oversee this project.

Perhaps a hired firm will be objective and thorough, but no one can be sure how such a firm's work will be influenced by the company that pays for it.

If there's any hope to be had, it's that Dominion will seek conditional use permits from Highland County to proceed with its project. We don't know how many, or when those applications might be submitted, but those would provide our county leaders with information and specifics to assess. Frankly, we're surprised Dominion would seek such local permits because as a multi-state federal project. We didn't think Dominion would be required to obtain local permits. But if so, good.

If last week's discussion is any indication, securing conditional use permits here will not be a walk in the park. Already the county asserts the project does not fit our comprehensive plan. And we can be assured a vast majority of residents and landowners here would be opposed to granting permits on various grounds ranging from the risk to water supplies to the adverse impacts on

endangered species and habitat. A permitting process would call for public input, and both planners and supervisors will strongly consider local voices in their decision.

It's a real shame Dominion has continued to obfuscate and delay providing answers to county governments and residents, but it's par for the course where this company is concerned. Dominion likes to tout how many public meetings it has hosted about the ACP, but the reality is, few have left the scattered, sometimes disorganized gatherings with any real answers. We know this because those folks — along with other state and federal agencies — have been submitting comments to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for years begging for answers and information. And, to this day, as comments pour in on the draft EIS, questions remain unanswered on everything from the location of access roads to how springs and wells will be protected.

FERC issued its draft EIS long before it had enough detail for anyone to review this project with enough knowledge. Last week's questions from Highland supervisors made that plenty clear. FERC should be ashamed for getting ahead of itself and succumbing to pressure from Dominion to stay on the company's schedule of construction.



In 2008, a Transco gas transmission pipeline exploded near Appomattox, due to corrosion. The line was 42 inches in diameter — the same size as the Atlantic Coast Pipeline which is proposed to cross through Bath and Highland counties. According to spectrabusters.org, “The failure resulted in the release of an undetermined amount of gas, which ignited producing a large fireball and resulting in a 37-foot wide, 15-foot deep crater and a burn zone approximately 1,125 feet in diameter. “Emergency responders including the Appomattox Fire Department, Virginia State Police, and Appomattox County Sheriff responded to the scene and evacuated approximately 23 families and closed nearby roads including Route 26 and Route 460. Five individuals were injured requiring hospitalization and two houses were destroyed in the fire.” (Photo courtesy Pipeline Safety Trust) Highland County supervisors deserved a meeting much sooner.