

# The Recorder

IN THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, SINCE 1877.

2017-11-30 / Opinions & Commentary

## Don't let all the spin make you dizzy

The evidence is overwhelming: Dominion Energy and its partners have the power and resources to turn night into day, black into white, and spin the most fundamentally clear facts into golden opportunities for their stockholders.

Talk about your fake news.

The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline, according to those who stand to reap millions in its wake, is necessary to the future of East Coast development.

Study after study shows this isn't true.

Dominion minions are part of a tremendous public relations machine. Multiple groups are enlisted to divide and conquer, submitting hundreds of similar comments to federal regulators in support of the project.

That machine includes firms who are hired to do so-called "independent" studies, many of which are simply experts at using just the right language and cherry-picking facts to bolster their claims.

Take, for example, the stacks of "evidence" Dominion submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to prove land values would not be affected by the project.

No one truly believes this. Sure, the presence of a pipeline in and of itself might not affect land values. But this isn't some six- or 12-inch pipeline. It's a 42-inch pipeline that is unprecedented in crossing some of the roughest terrain in Appalachia, a fracked gas superhighway that will destroy forests forever.

As reported last week, the latest Highland County reassessment resulted in lower values on properties the pipeline would cross, and properties nearby. That's a fact. Ask any one of those landowners and they'll show you the numbers. Their land lost value. That's good for next year's tax bill, but in the long run, it means their one big asset — the land they own and live upon — isn't worth as much as it was before the project was proposed. And it's not even built yet.

Ask the Koontzes in Bath County, too. They've been trying to sell a portion of their land, but their real estate agent has had no luck. It's not because the parcel isn't appealing. It's because the prospect of pipeline construction puts off potential buyers. The agent for more than two years can find no takers.

Whatever Dominion's claims about no loss of land value, the facts speak for themselves. Property values drop.

One wonders: If the property values drop, does that mean Dominion doesn't have to pay as much to landowners when they take their land, or negotiate easements? After all, those "negotiations" are based on fair market value. If the land isn't worth as much, the landowners most certainly stand to get less from Dominion.

Dominion's project devalues the land first, then it doesn't have to compensate the owners as much. What a scam.

In today's Recorder, we learn about how even governments are shut out. Dominion tells FERC there aren't any, or very few, historic resources that will be ruined or negatively impacted by the pipeline, but those who own or know of such resources can't participate in the process. Including local governments. Even though the law says they can.

How does this work? FERC just ignores the law? Apparently so.

Mortar-less stone walls in Augusta County, a documented historic asset on private property, will be ruined by pipeline construction. Augusta County asks FERC for status as a consulting party about those and other historic resources. The Augusta County Historical Society asks to be consulted, too. FERC has denied them such status so far.

According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, they must be included.

"FERC's failure to include the Augusta County Historical Society, and similar organizations, as consulting parties, and instead requesting that they review survey information and submit comments outside of the defined Section 106 consultation is not supported by any federal law," a Trust spokesman said.

Well, no surprise there. Dominion, it appears, is above the law. At minimum, the corporate giant seems to play fast and loose with the regulations. There's been no point so far, save its pipeline realignment to avoid a threatened salamander, when the company has been willing to abide by regulations and laws. Instead, it argues — quite adeptly — that it's following every regulation it must. The reality is, when those regulations get in the way, Dominion finds a way around them, usually by convincing regulators that its project is far more important than the collateral damage it will cause — to people, water, historic landmarks, or whatever.

And so far, every state and federal agency involved has bent to its will.

That, friends, is serious power.

We strongly support the residents, business owners, landowners, and local officials who are having none of this — those who continue to keep up the pressure on these agencies to do the right thing and follow the law.

Their resilience and determination is impressive. They give us hope that ordinary people, when banded toward this common goal, will gain their own power; enough power to defend their own land, and enough to defend our public lands, against this wholly destructive and unnecessary project.