

The Recorder

IN THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, SINCE 1877.

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Shameful



Want a taste of what pipeline construction yards will look like in Bath and Highland? Drive on over to Green Bank, W.Va., where Dominion's subcontractor has already taken over some property to store heavy equipment and buses. The company hopes to install at least two such yards in Highland County, and perhaps another in Bath. From these yards, workers will travel to locations along the pipeline route to get it installed into the ground. (Recorder photo by Geoff Hamill)

“It’s out of our hands.”

Is anyone else sick and tired of hearing this from our local, state, and federal officials?

It seems that, when it comes to serious issues facing Bath and Highland, and this region of the Highlands, no one wants to lead, to take responsibility for developments, projects, and programs that most deeply affect us here in the mountains.

The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline is the prime example.

Despite all reasonable evidence to the contrary, officials on both sides of the aisles are supporting this project no matter how much damage it does to our landowners and our environment.

For “single-issue” voters, anyone who hopes to elect a governor to protect them from the pipeline monstrosity doesn’t have a clear choice on Tuesday.

This pipeline is not a partisan topic. Both Democrats and Republicans have ducked the matter. Both Democrats and Republicans have supported it, too.

Gov. Terry McAuliffe (Democrat) has from the get-go touted Dominion’s plan for tearing up our mountains to attract new business to Virginia. This week, he defended that position, while simultaneously passing the buck to state officials and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

“It’s not the governor’s office, it’s a FERC permit,” he said, “and there are several permits it would go through the state. But that’s determined by the General Assembly on the regulations and how they’re defined ... If you don’t like someone for getting the permit, then go back and have the rules re-written by the General Assembly.”

Easier said than done, Governor.

Recall that Sen. Creigh Deeds (Democrat) and Del. Dickie Bell (Republican) both proposed legislation previously to protect landowners whose property will be taken by Dominion to make way for the pipeline. “All of that legislation and all the attempts have failed in the legislature,” Bell pointed out this week. “You know, there’s a lot of speculation why, and there are a lot of reasons why. I can’t tell you anything other than the fact Dominion has a significant presence there, which everybody already knows. Attempts to weaken those laws through legislation have not been successful.”

Directly on point: Dominion has a stranglehold on Virginia’s General Assembly and everyone knows it. Any attempt to undermine this project through state legislation will continue to fail because lawmakers are too beholden to Dominion ratepayers’ money.

“The hardest part is the governor’s been a big cheerleader for the pipeline and both candidates for governor right now are also on board for the pipeline, so that certainly doesn’t help with any legislative proposals that we might come forward with. I don’t think legislatively there’s much left to do, and I hate to say that, but I’m afraid that’s where we are,” Bell said.

And he’s right. Both gubernatorial candidates are afraid to get on the wrong side of Dominion Energy. We don’t think either of them will pressure the state agencies, particularly the DEQ, to do the right thing when it comes to protecting our water here — water, by the way, that flows to the Potomac, the James, and the Chesapeake Bay. Landowners in the Highlands will see their water disappear, become full of sediment, and more. But let’s not forget that whatever happens

to destroy water resources in our area also affects water running all the way down the line to Richmond. Trickle-down pollution can't be a policy anyone wants to cheer for.

McAuliffe said he supports the project as a job creator, and because it's his prerogative as governor to do that. Yet, he says, responsibility falls not on his office, but on the DEQ and FERC. "They're going to make their decisions. If they come out against it, they're going to do it, and it goes to my point — I don't have any say in it ... DEQ is going to make their decisions. FERC is making their decisions."

Swell.

We all know DEQ and FERC cannot be trusted to protect us.

Two FERC commissioners with only a few weeks in their seats to educate themselves about a project packaged in thousands of pages of opposition and documentation about adverse effects? They already rubber-stamped it.

DEQ will hold hearings next month, but it's taken three years of public pressure to get this agency to start thinking about how it will monitor the multiple water crossings that will alter our streams and underground resources. No one believes the DEQ will do anything but make empty promises.

McAuliffe says the project will be constructed "in the most environmentally safe way."

Opponents have plenty of evidence that Dominion, like other pipeline companies, has no track record for being the most environmentally safe. We call BS on that promise, too.

Incumbent Bath delegate Ben Cline (Republican) is also interested in safety. "We want to make sure, first and foremost, that residents of Bath and Augusta counties are safe, as it relates to the development and implementation of any pipeline," he told us this week.

We highly doubt he'll have any control over that, given the General Assembly's record of ignoring rural Virginia.

McAuliffe was in the area recently to extoll the virtues of BARC's new solar panels at our schools, as well he should. That was a huge, environmentally sound project that speaks directly to the kind of energy generation we need more of. We applaud the governor's support of such technology in Virginia.

But he cannot, in the same breath, applaud such an environmentally step backward in the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Construction of that 42-inch line in this area will do more harm than any industrial project here ever has. No one has come up with enough money and power to degrade this mountain environment — until now.

The decisions and processes have been shady, incomplete, and stupid.

Just recently, we learned Dominion favors tearing up property in McDowell for a pipe laydown yard instead of locating one in Millboro's industrial park. That adds five miles to road trips for pipe and trucks to reach construction spots. Take a look at the photos on page 25. Those are the kinds of trucks and buses that will travel down the rural, unmarked roads to Bath County. Why in the world would Dominion want to make that trip longer? Dumb idea.

Read up on the terrific words visitors from all over the U.S. had about Bath County and this region recently. They brought million-dollar collectible Mustangs to enjoy driving in our area. Would they have made Fort Lewis Lodge and our mountains their destination if Dominion tears up the property there for its pipeline? Doubtful.

And just this week, Governor, your Department of Historic Resources lauded your "Virginia Treasures" program — one that now includes The Wilderness farm. It's a place where your Virginia Outdoors Foundation holds two conservation easements the owners voluntarily added there to protect the place. And yet, VOF, too, abdicated its responsibility, saying it was out of their hands because FERC holds sway over that state agency. Now, the farm faces sure destruction because Dominion will put its pipeline straight through it.

Governor, you might be attracting big business to Virginia for cheap gas, but you're also putting at risk small, family-owned businesses like Fort Lewis, and people who have strived diligently to protect land. Is that how your Virginia works? It seems reasonable to you to sacrifice a few families and landowners out here in rural areas to make way for the fossil fuel industry?

You should be ashamed.

Your successor — and we'll find out in a few days who that will be — is inheriting a state government that seems perfectly willing to let the federal government have control of Virginia. Make no mistake: the feds are eagerly willing to sacrifice people, the places they live, the air they breathe, and the water they depend on — for corporate profit. One need look no further than Trump's steady gutting of the Environmental Protection Agency and his utter love for removing any regulation that stands in the way of industry.

Shame on you all.