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Pipeline, comp plan at issue tonight

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Pipeline-worker campground applicant Aaron Sponaugle sat in front of a packed modular conference room as Michele Bocharnikov stood at the podium. The March 22 hearing drew campground and pipeline opponents in advance of tonight's public hearing on the pipeline's conformity with the county comprehensive plan. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

MONTEREY — It's been nearly four divisive years since Dominion announced proposal of the Southeast Reliability Project, what would eventually be named the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Highland County tonight will stage its first effort to give citizens a local face-to-face encounter with Dominion over the \$6.5 billion interstate gas pipeline project, rife with delays and setbacks, and how it could affect the county's future.

The Highland County Planning Commission will take comments from the public at 6 p.m. tonight, Thursday, March 29, in the high school gymnasium.

Representatives from project majority owner Dominion will be on hand.

The last time the county used the gymnasium for a public hearing was for another energy project, a proposed industrial wind utility, in 2006.

Not a gripe session

The hearing tonight will focus on whether the proposed pipeline meshes with the county comprehensive plan. The stated purpose of the hearing is “to determine if the application to construct and operate a natural gas pipeline is substantially in accord with the Highland County Comprehensive Plan.”

Public comments during the hearing must specifically pertain to whether the project conforms to the plan. It will not be a complaint or praise session about anything and everything related to the pipeline.

About 55 Highland tax map parcels would be affected by the pipeline’s construction in some manner.

The actual pipeline would cross between 16 and 20 parcels. The remainder of the affected parcels have easements for access, construction, or other project related needs.

The route would cut through about 11 miles of southwestern Highland.

Virginia Code 15.2-2232 provides, “Whenever a local planning commission recommends a comprehensive plan or part thereof for the locality and such plan has been approved and adopted by the governing body, it shall control the general or approximate location, character and extent of each feature shown on the plan.”

Project applicant Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC asked the planning commission to determine whether the pipeline location, character, and extent of the proposed facility is substantially in accord with the comprehensive plan.

A staff report prepared by Darren Coffey of the Berkley Group recommends the commission “find the project in substantial accord with the comprehensive plan” because the county’s:

- Environmental priorities have been addressed to the extent possible by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission requirements;
- Economy will benefit during the duration of the pipeline’s construction in a manner that is not inconsistent with the comprehensive plan; and
- Transportation system will not be permanently affected and the main routes used will be the primary state routes (U.S. 250, U.S. 220, and Route 84).

The recommendation drew swift opposition from Highlanders for Responsible Development.

“HRD believes that the staff analysis of the project’s compatibility with Highland County’s Comprehensive Plan is woefully inadequate and wrongheaded,” the citizens group’s newsletter said. “It fails to properly evaluate the impact of the project’s massive effect on the county and instead mimics the conclusions of the applicant’s Statement of Justification. There is no evidence in the report of independent thinking.

“The ACP project would endanger the water quality of the county and affected residents, and it presents serious challenges to the geological integrity of Highland County’s steep slopes and karst topography. These are concerns that have been acknowledged by all the regulatory agencies that have passed judgment on the ACP, notwithstanding those agencies ultimately approving the project,” the group said.

“The county planning commission, in the interest of its own integrity, should not agree with the staff report and recommend to the board of supervisors that the Atlantic Coast Pipeline is in substantial accord with the comprehensive plan. It isn’t!”

A second opportunity for public input will arrive April 26, when the county has another public hearing, that time on material storage yards, so-called “satellite yards,” proposed in McDowell and south of Monterey. The time and location were yet to be announced.

Worker campground protested

County officials have been mostly neutral about the pipeline project, but citizens have expressed mixed feelings.

Opponents who wrote letters and signed petitions against a proposed campground for pipeline workers outnumbered supporters by more than 12 to one in voicing their protests to the county last week in a packed modular conference room.

During a joint public hearing Thursday, March 22, the planning commission and county supervisors received more than 60 statements against the pipeline related project in the Blue Grass Valley.

Aaron Sponaule applied for a conditional use permit to build and operate a 12-site recreational vehicle campground, proposed to house pipeline workers, on 11.88 acres at 4734 Maple Sugar Road.

Sponaule pointed out in his opening remarks that four generations of his family have lived in Highland. He said there would be no more than one ACP worker per RV; temporary visits by worker family members; and that he has long-term plans to make the campground permanent.

The pipeline project is expected to last 2-3 years.

His hand written application was for a “camp/RV park and construction camp.” There would be a “very moderate increase” in traffic and “minimal” noise, waste, dust and vapor, it explained.

Following the hearing, the commission voted to address Sponaugle's campground proposal in a work session at 7:30 p.m. April 26.

"A lot of good questions were raised tonight," supervisor David Blanchard said in recommending the work session.

'Why Blue Grass?'

Many of the campground's opponents wondered why a lodging facility for pipeline workers needed to be so far from the worksite in the southern part of the county.

Building and zoning official Joshua Simmons, as commission secretary, read their letters aloud, many complaining a campground would ruin all aspects that make Blue Grass Valley appealing.

Opponents urged planners and supervisors to deny the application and cited worries over land devaluation, traffic, noise, safety, lighting, groundwater, sanitation, increased demand for county services, and creation of an eyesore in an area known for scenic beauty.

"I never dreamed that there would be a campground with 10-plus trailers next to my slice of heaven," adjoining landowner Gerald McGlaughlin of Churchton, Md. said in his letter.

"I oppose this campground idea with every bone in my body. Aside from the fact that I immediately have the equivalent of a motel adjacent to my property with up to a dozen or more unknown people living there, the traffic, the noise, and the unknowns that go with a campground, it just plain ruins the use of my land."

Sponaugle's land parcel is not suited to serve as a campground, adjacent landowners and full-time resident Michele Bocharnikov argued. "The lot's relatively narrow shape and the proposed layout does not allow for a proper buffer or screening. This will negatively impact our, as well as our neighbors' right to quiet enjoyment of our properties.

"Sound carries in this part of the valley, and the noise pollution and light pollution from the RV park/campground, as well as the great number of people that will necessarily occupying at any one time 24/7, 365 days a year will far exceed the noise level and continuous lighting that would normally be allowed in a residential/agricultural area such as ours," she said.

"Myself and the Bocharniovs are the only homeowners whose property is attached to the proposed site who live full-time at said properties," Blue Grass resident Jeff Evans said. "I do not believe either the owners of the proposed campground, or any other landowner whose property is attached to the site, who has supported the idea and do not live there full-time, would want such a project where they do live.

"There are places for such a development in the county, but not in an established peaceful neighborhood of taxpaying farmers, business owners and landowners."

Faye Chapman pointed out plenty of people live in manufactured housing in the area, but there are big differences from a campground. “Many of the folks on Maple Sugar Road live in trailers, but they occupy single lots and are stable, long-term resident family people who have their own sources of water and waste disposal. I do not see how a trailer court fits into the neighborhood at all,” she said.

Cathryn Weller questioned why worker housing needed to be located in Blue Grass when there was an established site for that purpose at Jack Mountain Village, which was used by workers on the Bath County Pumped Storage Station project.

Larry Bandy said the campground would essentially create a new village. “There will be more full-time people than New Hampden,” Bandy said.

David Kiser said he would hate to see the owners of farmland he rents leave because of the campground. “That would be devastating,” Kiser said.

‘Ghost town’ predicted

The four people who spoke in support of Sponaugle expressed concern over turning down a new business.

“His family has been here four generations,” business owner John Vandevander said. “If people continue to shoot down small businesses, Highland is going to be a ghost town. Sooner than later you’re not going to have anybody here.”

County attorney Melissa Dowd said the county should require a variance in addition to a conditional use permit because the zoning ordinance restricts the occupation of recreational vehicles to no more than 14 consecutive days.

A variance is needed so people could live there more than 14 days, she explained.

Supervisor Kevin Wagner asked Sponaugle about his construction time line, campground site pad composition, and the size of the RVs.

Sponaugle explained he would like to start construction when the weather changes, probably in about a month.

The pads would consist of crushed stone on shale. He said the RVs would be in the 30-foot length range.

Wagner said supervisors need to be prepared for similar applications.

“If not (Sponaugle), it’s going to be somebody else,” Wagner said.