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Bath emergency services, Dominion discuss protocols

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BY MIKE BOLLINGER • STAFF WRITER

WARM SPRINGS — Representatives of Bath County emergency services, Dominion Energy and Atlantic Coast Pipeline attended a meeting held last Wednesday to discuss emergency procedures during pipeline construction.

The Recorder requested to attend the meeting, but Dominion and ACP declined that request, indicating sensitive information could be discussed.

A good exchange

Harold King, chair of the Bath County Local Emergency Planning Committee and president of the Bath County Fire and Rescue Association, said in an interview last Thursday morning he believed good information was exchanged between county fire and rescue, as well as sheriff's office representatives, and Dominion.

Bath emergency management coordinator Andy Seabolt said the agenda involved emergency response during construction. "I think it was 100 percent productive. The first responders were at the table with ACP folks and contractors. We were able to verify with each other what procedures we would use to respond to emergencies on a construction site. We've been thinking about this for the last year and a half," he said.

"There was a very good exchange of information. I was very pleased with the effort from everyone. I think we discussed all that we need at this point," said Eddie Davis of Dominion via email. "Contingency plans for most any type of incident from personal injury to traffic accidents were discussed, and how we would handle those as a group effort."

King said the group was able to work through what strategy would be used if there was an injury on the pipeline. “We wanted to know what would be expected by Dominion as far as local emergency services support,” he said.

Designated personnel on the construction site will have radios that will be able to hit towers in both Bath and Highland, so they will be able to communicate with the county 911 centers, King said. He said it was agreed in life-threatening situations, the 911 dispatch centers would be used.

Seabolt said satellite phones would also be used for communications.

If medical helicopters are needed, King said there would be pre-designated landing zones. Seabolt noted these have not yet been determined in Bath, as construction in Bath County is not scheduled to start until 2019.

King said there would be ACP personnel trained in first aid that will be able to handle non-life threatening situations. “We talked about if there is a serious or life-threatening injury, how would we respond,” he said.

Seabolt said, “They will have some personnel heavily first aid trained. I feel comfortable they can truly give us an idea of what’s going on with a patient.”

King said if local responders need to travel into the construction zone, ACP employees would take them to exact locations. “They will be sensitive to the type of response vehicle we are using. We spent a good bit of time figuring out how we are going to respond.”

Fuel spills

Seabolt said discussions also included how fuel or other spills would be handled, including ACP’s capacity for spill containment. “They will have equipment there. If it is a large spill, we will have resources head to it also,” he said.

King agreed the response would depend on the nature of the spill. “If it is a major incident, the state hazmat team, VDEM (Virginia Department of Emergency Management) and DEQ (Virginia Department of Environmental Quality) would be involved. We would have all the alphabet soup in place,” he said.

In addition, he said law enforcement response regarding employees or protestors was a topic.

“We didn’t get all the information we need because all plans aren’t complete yet. Over the next few months, for example, the landing zones will be identified and we will plug those into our plans,” Seabolt said.

King said they discussed how responders would cross the pipeline when roads had to be cut to install pipe. “When a trench is open across a road, they will have equipment to drop steel plates over the opening and make the road passable,” he said.

Not all emergency responders will have flashing lights on their personal vehicles, King noted. Dominion said as long as someone identifies themselves as an emergency responder, trenches would be covered as quickly as possible, King said. “We need more detail on this to get my comfort level up,” King said.

He believes follow-up information would help. “Nothing that was said in the meeting seemed to be insurmountable,” he said.

He said Dominion would have equipment to bore under major roads, but would not do that under smaller roads such as Muddy Run or Dry Run. King said the extreme topography of those areas makes it impractical for such equipment to be used. “They said it would be difficult and expensive and they were not convinced there was any justification,” he said.

Seabolt said when a call is received through Bath’s 911 center, it will be treated like any other. “We will get in touch with them and find out what’s going on, then respond like we normally would,” he said.

Trench rescue had been a concern of Seabolt’s. “This was a non-issue for them (Dominion),” he said. “They have best management standards for trenching that go beyond recommendations. Trench collapses are virtually unheard of during pipeline construction. They will have people on site and we will assist with medical and rescue as needed.”

King agreed. “They will not be training local folks in trench rescue. They think the likelihood of an incident is so small because they are so cautious and have such a good track record, that it will not be necessary,” he said.

Gaining access

King noted that should a person become trapped due to a vehicle accident on an access road, ACP workers would guide local responders to the location.

Seabolt noted since access roads will have to be built to accommodate heavy truck traffic, ambulances and fire equipment would be able to use them as needed. “My only concern is if something happens before these roads are fully developed,” he said.

King said the access roads have to be built for trucks carrying 40-foot sections of pipe. Workers would be transported in buses and some would use their personal vehicles. “I don’t think getting equipment across the access roads is a major concern,” he said.

How to access remote areas if a wildfire occurs was discussed, but King said, “I never heard a complete answer.”

If a fire happens on national forest land, the U.S. Forest Service would respond, and if on state forest, the Virginia Department of Forestry would respond, he said. “As with any incident, they would get in touch with the 911 center and work with dispatch to make sure proper resources are dispatched,” King said.

King said he worries about the unknowns Dominion and ACP personnel could face during construction. He said the company's previous pipeline construction has been on "nice, rolling ground" with some hills and through dirt. But here, he said, "They are going to hit shale and karst. They will encounter conditions they have never hit before. To bring that up in the meeting theoretically was pointless. We will have to get into it and see," King said.

He also said he is concerned about water crossings, wetlands and streams. "They could dig down and hit an underground stream or aquifer. I'm very concerned about them controlling pollution and runoff. It's good they have a lot of experience and have laid thousands of miles of pipeline. It could be that I'm worrying for nothing.

"I don't think they've ever faced what they're going to face before. They will have to be extremely cautious," he said.

Seabolt believes there will be more emergency calls in Bath once construction begins. "There will be an increase, but I don't think it's going to be appreciable," he said. "We can handle it."

For the most part, Seabolt said, existing equipment should be able to handle pipeline-related emergencies. If other equipment is needed, Seabolt said the county could seek grants or work with Dominion/ACP to acquire it.

Now that the meeting has been held, Seabolt said he would continue to prepare written standard operating guidelines for pipeline-related emergencies.

"From the meeting, I can fill in the blanks and correct some assumptions I had before. Over the next few weeks I will correct verbiage and add maps as I get those. We will have specific standard operating guidelines for the pipeline construction project," he said.

King said when construction is set to begin in Bath, he anticipates another such meeting with significantly more detailed plans.

"Everyone agreed we need a followup before the beginning of construction activities in Bath County," he said.