

The Recorder

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Highland officials need more information

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Big decisions loom.

Thursday, Highland County planners and supervisors will hold joint public hearings on Dominion Energy's applications for storage yards to use as its proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline is under construction.

Planners might also use that opportunity to issue their decision on Dominion's application for finding its project "substantially in accord" with the county's comprehensive plan.

Also at that meeting, planners will again review an application for an RV campground for pipeline workers in the Blue Grass Valley.

It could be a long night.

Importantly, there is time for anyone to provide further comments or information on these matters. We strongly encourage area residents to do that.

We have for decades maintained that Highland's growth and economic future rests largely on its land-use decisions, and this one is a doozy. Figuring out how to accommodate the construction and existence of a major gas transmission pipeline involves considering the effects on our environment and natural resources, water quality and erosion issues, traffic and changes to our roads, the impact of temporary housing, and more.

Comp plan review

Last month, county consultant Darren Coffey submitted a report to supervisors and planners concluding the pipeline project must be found in accord with the comprehensive plan.

No disrespect to Coffey or the quality of his work, but we wholly disagree with his findings. As every speaker the night of this subject's hearing told our leaders, there is little about this project that fits with our plan.

The consultant's report rested substantially on the idea that because it's a federal project, the county has no authority to disapprove of Dominion's application for a ruling. And, because the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission required protections and mitigations, there's no reason to believe Dominion's project would upend our plan's focus on the quality of our environment here.

Hogwash.

The county can most certainly determine the project is not in accord with the comprehensive plan. Dominion would not care. The corporate giant intends to forge ahead regardless of what county leaders say. If there is to be a legal challenge to the county's decision, then let the courts rule on the point of federal law trumping local authority.

What's important is that our leaders listen to their constituents, all of whom know far more about Highland County than a hired consultant or Dominion Energy. Residents here know their water sources could easily be wiped out. They know erosion and sediment control measures have yet to satisfy anyone that Dominion would protect our mountain ridges and rivers. They understand very few, if any, local jobs would be created. They understand the negative effect on property values and real estates sales, which has already hurt our local economy. Listen to them.

Storage yards

Likewise, there's plenty of concern about Dominion's applications for conditional use permits and rezoning for laydown yards in McDowell and Monterey that would be more than 10 miles from the pipeline's construction sites.

We are eager to learn what the Virginia Department of Transportation says about how entrances and roads will be treated. But even if VDOT can accommodate the massive changes and additions to our primary and secondary roads, these yards present plenty of other problems.

Dominion's applications contained numerous errors, and were incomplete. Until county leaders can get the right information, they cannot make an informed decision on these, either.

For example, planners asked about where Dominion would get water for dust control in the yards, and Dominion said that would come from a public supply, or a permitted source. Considering the years of work trying to stabilize the county's water system in McDowell, allowing Dominion to tap into that is problematic at best. We don't know where a "permitted" source might be, but if Dominion intends to tap into Monterey's system, that's going to be a problem, too. The applications should not be considered until this issue is adequately addressed.

Dominion told planners that work would take place 10 hours a day, six days a week, and for stream crossing, nights and Sundays, too. In Highland, that kind of traffic over 2-3 years of construction would be hazardous and disruptive.

RV campground

Planners are also facing a decision about whether to allow an RV campground in the Blue Grass Valley, primarily to be used by pipeline workers initially. This brought plenty of mixed feelings from residents, most of whom were adamantly opposed to the idea, because no one here likes to tell other people what to do with their own land. The private landowner hopes to earn some income from the park, and we don't like the idea of keeping our neighbors from making money, either.

But the location is a problem. The Blue Grass Valley is one of Highland's best assets. Tourists love it. Maple sugar producers tap into its resources. Those who live and farm in the valley are vitally protective of its beauty, steep slopes, and rolling meadows. It's agricultural, and any cluster of development like that which is proposed now would not be consistent with the valley's integrity.

While landowner Aaron Sponaugle says the park would be limited to 12 RVs, and he's confident the pipeline contractor would help him keep disturbances to a minimum, those opposed to the idea list numerous concerns that have yet to be adequately addressed. Planners need more time, and more information, before a decision on this application can be made.

National permit

There's one more place citizens should send comments and information — Virginia's State Water Control Board.

The board is charged with considering the Army Corps' 401 national permit, which will affect how Dominion builds the pipeline and under what methods, requirements, and mitigation levels.

The board has opened up the comment period a little longer, and those concerned about water quality should focus on whether controls are adequate to protect fragile mountain water resources.

The Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition has written numerous explanations about why this 401 permitting process fails to serve Virginia. Explore the coalition's positions at www.pipelineupdate.org to learn more.

Use your voice

To send information or concerns about the decisions facing the planning commission about the comprehensive plan review, the proposed storage yards, or the proposed RV campground, write to the Highland County Department of Building and Zoning, P.O. Box 188, Monterey, Va. 24465, or via email: hilandbz@htcnet.org.

To send information or concerns about the nationwide permit application, write to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, P.O. Box 1105, Richmond, Va. 23218; or via e-mail: comment-acp@deq.virginia.gov.

These issues deserve all the details and answers we can provide to our decision-makers. Speak up.