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Pipeline incompatible with county goals, citizens warn

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BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



“There is no reason to believe natural resources will be protected and preserved,” Rick Webb said. (Recorder photos by John Bruce)

MONTEREY — During a public hearing March 29, opponents to the current route for the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline agreed it would conflict with the Highland County Comprehensive Plan, despite a consultant’s advice.

About 60 people turned out to the hearing in the high school gymnasium. County consultant Darren Coffey of The Berkley Group preceded the hearing by recommending the planning commission find the project in agreement with the comprehensive plan. He said the doctrine of preemption, which holds federal authority overrides state and local control, “makes the situation unique.”



Lynn Limpert asked how mountain ridgetops reduced to rubble “and scarred forever” could ever be restored.

‘Great job’

Following the roughly hour-long hearing, planners voted to table its decision until their next meeting on April 26.

Emmett Toms, public affairs manager for project majority owner Dominion Energy and the sole proponent to speak, praised Coffey for his recommendation favoring the project.



“We believe the ACP project would endanger the water quality,” Lew Freeman cautioned.

“Darren has done a great job,” Toms said. The pipeline route would cross “only 11 miles in Highland and 85 percent of landowners have signed agreements,” Toms said. He did not indicate the number of miles of access roads that would be part of the project. The company received approval for a 50-foot wide right of way after seeking 75 feet, Toms said.

Little Valley landowner Bill Limpert was the first of nine speakers who strongly disagreed with Coffey’s finding. The consultant’s report is misguided, and the project is unnecessary because the Energy Information Administration predicts flat energy consumption for the foreseeable future, Limpert said. Gas from the pipeline may go to South Carolina or overseas. “In any case, Highland County will receive no gas from the pipeline,” Limpert said.



“The concerns of residents in the path of the pipeline about their wells and springs have been brushed aside,” John Sweet told planners last week. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

His spouse, Lynn Limpert, said the project takes away rights from landowners. She asked how mountain ridgetops reduced to rubble “and scarred forever” could ever be restored.

Advice unheeded

John Sweet of Mustoe cited the comprehensive plan’s position that land use policy must “provide for the fair and equitable treatment of all landowners.” He referred to another section, stating, “Because of the delicacy of local ground and surface water, potential industries handling or storing hazardous materials should be stringently evaluated and discouraged in many locations due to karst and watershed issues. In addition, proper buffers between new industries, utilities and existing residential and agricultural uses are recommended to minimize impact on agricultural landowners.”

“The proposed pipeline obviously is an industry handling hazardous materials that has not been stringently evaluated,” Sweet said. “In fact, Dominion has ignored the advice of its own contractor” by routing the project through Valley Center. “The concerns of residents in the path of the pipeline about their wells and springs have been brushed aside,” Sweet said.

“The ever increasing cost of the project is being paid by ratepayers while the benefits will accrue to investors. It can in no way be considered as essential infrastructure as its ultimate result will be to transfer money into Dominion’s coffers more quickly than would be otherwise possible. ‘Fair and equitable’ is totally absent from this equation ... the inevitable conclusion is that the ACP is incompatible with” the comprehensive plan,” Sweet said.

Lew Freeman, president of Highlanders for Responsible Development, told planners that accepting Coffey’s recommendation “would be a mistake and would compromise the (commission’s) integrity as land use stewards of the county’s natural resource assets.”

Freeman reiterated Dominion’s failure to follow its own contractor’s recommendation to avoid Valley Center.

“We believe the ACP project would endanger the water quality of the county and affected residents, and that 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 the ultimate approval of the project by some of those agencies.

“These are also concerns of Dominion Energy’s own consultants (who strongly and repeatedly recommend) the routing through the Valley Center area of the county is highly inadvisable,” Freeman said.

He quoted the comprehensive plan: “Karst terrain is relatively weak and unstable and may present problems for development.”

Freeman continued, “For this reason alone, the planning commission should not find that the Atlantic Coast Pipeline is compatible for the county’s comprehensive plan.

Dominion’s ‘doormat’

“As individuals, some of you may support the pipeline or be indifferent to it. But, as members of the planning commission, you should not agree with the staff report’s conclusion that the ‘county’s environmental priorities have been addressed to the extent possible.’ We contend that they have not been adequately addressed,” Freeman continued.

Freeman rebuffed Coffey’s finding the project would benefit the county economy. That judgment ignores declining property taxes and real estate tax income, he said. “There are numerous examples of prospective buyers of Highland County property who have chosen to look elsewhere because of the ACP. After construction commences, that dampening of effect on property values will be sure to intensify,” Freeman said.

He concluded the commission’s rejection of the Coffey recommendation would not stop the project, but “will signal that Highland County’s government will not stand by and let the county be treated like a doormat for any development that is incompatible with the county and its citizens, regardless of how big a company the prospective developer is.”

Rick Webb of Mustoe, coordinator of the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition, questioned the effectiveness of “best management practices” professed by Dominion. He described the practices as “minimal to begin with.” The builder’s technologies cannot work, he said, and detailed plans are lacking to address steep mountain slopes. More than half of the route crosses slopes exceeding 30 percent.

“We don’t know the plan for slopes that are steeper,” Webb said. “There is no reason to believe natural resources will be protected and preserved.”

Winifred Stephenson said many questions remain unanswered. For instance, the “state-of-the-art” pipeline emergency response center in West Virginia would be more than three hours from Highland — would it be operational in power failures?

“We’re heading in the wrong direction,” Stephenson said. Why is the U.S. focusing on natural gas when Saudi Arabia is investing in gigawatts of solar power? “This is Saudi Arabia,” she emphasized.

Michele Bocharnikov asked how many people in Highland belong to labor unions after stating Dominion signed contracts with unions. Proposed worker accommodations would house workers brought in from outside of the county, she said. The project is not providing economic development in any positive way, she added.

‘Killing the goose’

Former planning commission chair Bill Rich drew on the fable “The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg” to illustrate how short-sighted greed can destroy the profitability of an asset. “People travel great distances to get to this special place, Highland County. The ACP is essentially killing the goose that laid the golden egg for Highland County,” said Rich, whose comments drew applause.

Anne Bryan of Burnsville cited the growing problem of mental health and stress with respect to the proposed pipeline. “I ask each person, especially those from Dominion, to do something different tomorrow,” she said.

Toms concluded the pipeline would benefit the county because BARC Electric Cooperative buys electricity from Dominion.