

# The Recorder

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## Volunteers, citizens deserve information

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Openness and transparency are not Dominion Energy's strong suits, as we've learned over the last four years. It just doesn't seem to share well with others.

We bumped up against the company's penchant for behind-the-scenes talk again last month.

The corporate giant pressured our Bath County volunteers to keep us from attending a meeting to discuss the how-to details of responding to emergencies related to Dominion's proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline construction and operation.

At a February meeting of the Local Emergency Planning Committee, of which The Recorder is a participating member, a March 20 meeting with Dominion was announced. Our Bath County editor asked to attend and report on the discussion; we have attended similar meetings over prior months. At first, there was no question he could attend. But following discussion among Dominion representatives and Bath emergency services officials at the LEPC meeting, the March 20 meeting was closed to the public, including The Recorder.

We later learned that Dominion was concerned if the public knew when and where the meeting would be held, pipeline project opponents would attend and be disruptive. Or want to ask questions, or interject statements. Or Dominion's "on-the-ground" construction managers could face questions they were not authorized to answer — only Dominion's public relations could do that. Also, there seemed to be concern that proprietary information related to responding to emergency or criminal situation would be revealed.

We argued the information shared in such a meeting was not only important for local volunteers to know, but also details citizens wanted, and needed, to be informed about Dominion's plans. Bath County citizens and landowners — the people our EMS volunteers protect and serve so well — have raised numerous fears about their safety with regard to this project for nearly four years, and precious few questions have been answered. The information apt to surface at the meeting is critical to them, we said.

The Recorder and Allegheny Mountain Radio are a part of the LEPC because we are a vital connection to communications in emergencies, and getting information to the public. In addition, we said, if any proprietary or sensitive information or records are shared, there are lawful ways those could be excluded from public view. We agreed to use our discretion and not report such information.

After several discussions, emergency services coordinator Andy Seabolt agreed and invited The Recorder to attend and report on the March 20 meeting. But a few days before it was to be held, Seabolt told us the meeting was cancelled because not enough people could attend.

A week later, Seabolt said no such meeting would be held at all. His vision for the meeting — where any and all volunteers could participate — was hard to coordinate and he wanted to hold off until it could be planned later.

But then Dominion insisted on holding it sooner. Suddenly, a meeting was again on the schedule for last Wednesday, but was kept hush-hush.

Once we learned about it, we asked Dominion if we could attend, but we were turned down. Because Dominion secured the venue for the meeting, county officials were unable to allow us to attend.

To their credit, both Dominion and EMS representatives offered to give us the meeting details later, which they did, but it's much harder to report the facts and discussion when a reporter is not there to hear context and perspective.

Emergency rescue and fire volunteers have said dozens of times that understanding the essential plans for handling any emergency during and after pipeline construction was critical to their knowledge base.

What personnel will Dominion have on hand while construction takes place? What are their skills and certifications? What kind of personnel does Bath County need to augment its own volunteer base? Who responds first? Do our rescue squads, first responders, deputies, and firefighters have the right kind of equipment to handle sudden illness, fire, or accidents in the rough mountain terrain where this pipeline is planned? If there is extra or specialized training needed, will Bath County be able to secure that before construction starts?

Some of these questions were answered last week; some were not.

There are dozens of important questions, and neighboring residents want to know these things, too. Everyone needs assurance our county is prepared for the kinds of emergencies that have not arisen here before.

Bath County citizens, and especially emergency volunteers, deserve answers. We are encouraged that last week's meeting provided some answers and put a few minds at ease.

But we are endlessly discouraged that Dominion makes getting answers so difficult for the general public.

It's not like these are state secrets, folks. Open up.