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Va. Secretary visits landowners affected by pipeline

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BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — A high-ranking delegation of state officials and pipeline company executives visited landowners on Jack Mountain near Little Valley June 7.

State officials led by Secretary of Natural Resources Matt Strickler and Dominion Energy representatives, met at the northern Bath County home of Bill and Lynn Limpert. Their main purpose was to discuss how to prevent the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline from harming the Limperts' old-growth forest.

Getting creative

The Limperts talked with Strickler earlier this year about their old growth trees in peril. Dominion asked Bill Limpert to meet and discuss “creative” solutions. Dominion later stated it would see if it could avoid or mitigate for old growth forest loss.

“We talked about the old growth forest and the fact that a good portion of that is thought to be very rare, never been cut, virgin forest,” Limpert said. “We also talked about karst and threats to our waters, including our drinking water, losing streams on both sides of the proposed route of the pipeline through our property, including one that sinks into the ground within 250 feet of our well.”

Also, he said, “Steep slopes and recent landslides near the proposed line in Little Valley, difficult construction issues, safety issues, and the fact that six homes would be trapped at the top of the valley with no chance of escape or rescue in a pipeline emergency.”

Limpert said they also discussed endangered species, including the rusty patched bumblebee that was found within a half mile of his property, and the Madison cave isopod, which the Federal

Energy Regulatory Commission states must be assumed to be present in karst areas. Loss of scenic beauty was also brought up. “We talked about poor planning by Dominion, in not originally acknowledging karst in Little Valley,” Limpert added.

“My suggestion is to move the line to collocate with Dominion’s own electric utility line to the north of Little Valley that runs from the pumped storage facility to near Churchville. Dominion advised that collocation is difficult due to side-slopes, but I questioned the validity of that statement. They also said that the Cow Knob salamander was found along a large part of Shenandoah Mountain, making it difficult to cross at any location, even with a collocated line. They stated that they had offered to bore under part of Shenandoah Mountain, but the U.S. Forest Service would not allow that either. I advised that the U.S. Forest Service may have changed their views on this under the current administration.”

Gary Robinson also attended the meeting, and he advised that he, his wife Jeannette, and other owners of their historic farm that would be crossed by the proposed access road on Jack Mountain would not sign any easement agreements.

The Limperts advised they would not sign any easement agreement as well.

Shifting plans

Robinson said he was struck by engineers’ comments while looking at the mountainsides that they would not follow steep slope construction plans filed with regulators.

“If the plans aren’t firm on paper, then they ought to be doing more research,” Robinson said, noting it became obvious no one from the pipeline company had previously seen the actual conditions firsthand.

The Robinsons soon plan to move into their new home on Little Valley Farm, which has been in the family since 1792. They are concerned about a pipeline access road the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permitted to cross known endangered rusty patch bumblebee habitat along the top of Jack Mountain.

Strickler asked Dominion about moving the route away from the problem areas, and the stock answer was, “We’re too far along in the process,” Robinson said.

He said even though the outcome of the meeting is uncertain, the fact that high-ranking people from the state and the pipeline company visited Bath County was positive, considering it was the first time they saw the actual situation.

The question of the proposed pipeline’s effect on water quality has yet to be answered because tests so far have been inconclusive, Robinson said.

Dominion consultant GeoConcepts doesn’t know the extent of the Little Valley karst system, Robinson said. Still, “Dominion wants to build here without all the information they need. They’re jumping the gun,” he said.

Last summer, the Department of Conservation and Recreation designated the Little Valley Slope Conservation Site, including land owned by the Limperts and Little Valley Farm, to protect a “significant natural community of central Appalachian oak-hickory forest.” The biodiversity ranking is B2, which represents very high significance.

Uncovered issues

“I mentioned that the pipeline was not needed, unjust, and immoral, and Secretary Strickler objected to the discussion moving in that direction,” Limpert said. “I don’t think we talked about property value losses. Nor did we discuss the list of grievances I sent to Dominion regarding survey issues and property misrepresentations, nor the very bad revised erosion and sediment control plan submitted to (the Department of Environmental Quality) for our property and Little Valley.

“We walked with the group through the old growth forest and the proposed path of the pipeline through our lower parcel. We did not walk up through the Little Valley Slope Conservation Area on our upper parcel that contains the virgin forest with the group, although Secretary Strickler and deputy secretary Chris Ludwig walked up there after Dominion left,” Limpert said.

Present at the meeting in addition to the Limperts, Gary Robinson, Stricker and Ludwig were Isaac Sarver of the Department of Conservation and Recreation; and an Atlantic Coast Pipeline team consisting of Leslie Hartz, vice president of engineering; Ann Loomis, vice president of federal affairs, Molly Plautz, federal affairs, Spencer Trichell, environmental, John Kimbleton, land, David Aman, land, Luke Knapp, engineering and construction, and Steve Stuter, engineering and construction. Several others from Doyle Land and possibly security personnel attended too, but Limpert didn’t recall their names, except for Doyle surveyor Alvin Couturier, who asked if he could survey Limpert’s property in the near future.

The meeting lasted from 2 to 5 p.m. for Dominion personnel, with Strickler and Ludwig staying on and walking up the mountain until about 6 p.m.

“Dominion first called us about a month ago, but we couldn’t set it up due to conflicting schedules until June 7,” Limpert said. “I think there will be further discussion between the governor’s office, through Strickler and Dominion. I’m guessing that Dominion will resist moving the line, and probably will not move it. I think there is a small chance that they will reluctantly move the line a little, and publicly pat themselves on the back for being responsive to citizens’ concerns, big trees, and the environment.”

Next step unknown

“Neither Secretary Strickler nor Dominion said they would get back to us,” he added.

“We don’t want to move the line onto anybody else. Dominion should scrap the project due to the numerous negative impacts it would have. If the project moves forward, additional collocation would reduce impacts on private property and a number of other negative impacts as well, but no ACP is a lot better than a collocated ACP,” he said.

“The ACP is a destructive and divisive project that puts people at odds with one another, and disrupts the cooperative functioning of our society. Rather than spending \$5.5 billion to \$6.5 billion on this ill-conceived project, Dominion and their ACP partners should invest that money in renewable energy projects, excluding wind turbines on our ridgetops. Once renewable energy systems are in place, and except for minor maintenance costs, the energy they produce is abundant, inexhaustible, and free, while not contributing to unhealthy air pollution, or greenhouse gases, which are causing climate change.

“Dominion’s image as a corporate bully would be greatly improved, even with their shareholders, if they scrapped the ACP, got on the right side of history, and invested in truly sustainable renewable energy,” Limpert said.

Neither Strickler nor Dominion responded to The Recorder for comment about the meeting.