

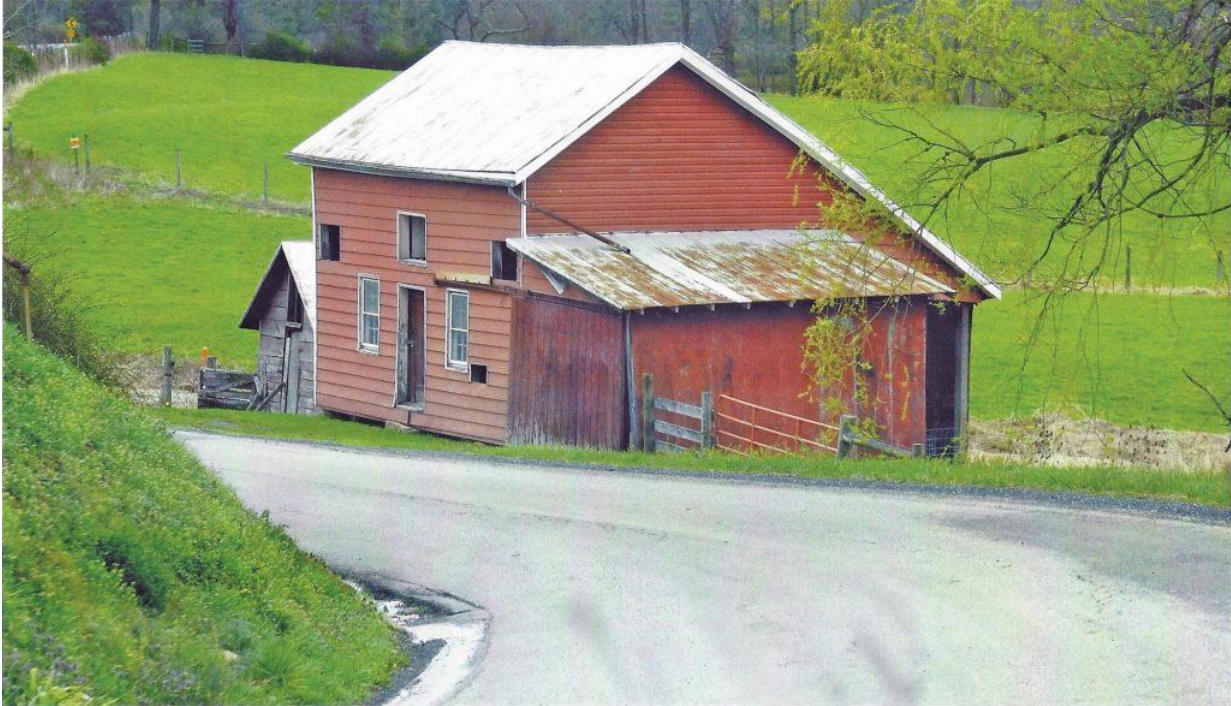
# The Recorder

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## Pipeline traffic vexes Route 678 residents

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**BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER**



Just around a blind curve near the Shumate house, there is another blind turn as the road heads toward a structure at the edge of Route 678. (Photos courtesy Priscilla Melchior)

**McDOWELL** – Chris Little lives on one of the scariest roads in Highland County. He’s worried the road is about to get a whole lot scarier.

Blind curves, nonexistent shoulders, failing road banks and rock cliff embankments — all undetectable from a road map — are everyday challenges for Little and others who live on and near a 21-mile stretch of Route 678 (Bullpasture River Road) between McDowell and Fort Lewis Lodge.

The road would be a high-volume arterial pathway for the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Dump trucks filled with stone aggregate, water tankers, lowboys carrying massive earth-movers, and other heavy equipment would be negotiating a road unsuitable for those types of vehicles, residents say.

Little hopes someone from managing partner Dominion Energy will drive the road to see the hazards of Route 678 firsthand before construction.

“We have been talking to as many pertinent government and private people as possible to get them the pictures (of road hazards) and safety issues,” Little said. “This is a public safety issue on 678 because people who live here don’t have any other option.”



This is the shale bank as seen from the north. There is no shoulder on either side of the road, with the shale cliff on the right, and a steep bank into the river on the left. The cliff frequently sheds rocks onto the road.

He repeated his concern to Sen. Creigh Deeds, who referred him to the Virginia Department of Transportation Lexington Residency, which covers Highland. Engineer Mike Henry met with Little, his wife, Betsy, and neighbors, at their home about a month ago. The VDOT response was that the agency’s hands were tied as long as the trucks and drivers are properly licensed.

“What they’re proposing is so dangerous,” Little said. He told Henry he was so concerned about safety he was considering whether to ford the Bullpasture River and climb over Bullpasture Mountain on a dirt road as a less dangerous alternative to Route 678.

“The issue is first responder access, service people going in and out. It’s also an issue for turkey and hay trucks,” he said.

“All of us have had close calls, but we didn’t face the danger these trucks represent. Our view is it’s an extremely dangerous hazard to use 678 for the size and frequency of dump trucks and lowboys hauling heavy equipment, going around multiple blind curves on a road never intended for it,” Little said.





About eight miles from McDowell, Route 678 goes through a stretch where the road is hemmed in by a sharp bank on the right and an extremely steep bank on the left that ends in the Bullpasture River. It then makes a sharp left turn before a blind right turn. Note the bank above the river was failing. VDOT has attempted to stabilize the bank with rock.

Little decided to step forward “because I live here, because my wife, family, friends and neighbors and people who work with us would be subject to grave physical danger. I hope Dominion will commission a traffic engineering study. That would be the logical thing to do.”

“We’re aware of the concerns about Bullpasture River Road, and we’ve been in communication with local residents about this issue,” Dominion spokesman Aaron Ruby said in reply to The Recorder’s inquiry of whether a study is planned. “We’ve developed detailed transportation plans to address these concerns, including the use of pilot cars, flaggers and temporary lane closures to ensure safe travel. We’ll make sure the roads remain open for local residents, while taking all necessary precautions to protect public safety and the safety of our employees,” Ruby said.



Approaching a shale cliff that is beyond this blind curve, drivers will note the speed limit and turn sign for the curve, which goes down as it turns. Note also the driveway on the left. The cliff frequently sheds rocks onto the road.



Little recalls when the original pipeline route was 20 miles north of the currently proposed pipeline route, only about a mile of Route 678 would have been involved. “They want to stick to using 678 even now the route has moved 20 miles south,” he said. “I hope some people from Dominion drive the road. It’s not only affecting people on 678,” Little said, adding residents along Burnsville Road and the south end of Calfpasture River Road would be among those also affected.



Route 678 rises through the gorge. There are no guard rails, and they would be difficult to install for lack of space in most places. This is one of several blind turns encountered through the gorge.



Chris Little measured the width of Route 678 at the rock cliff. His right foot was on the edge of the pavement, which measures less than 17 feet wide.





Above: Looking north just past the Shumate house, there is no road shoulder on either side as the road heads up between a steep bank on the left and a larger, extremely steep bank on the right. There is no guard rail and no room for one. At the top of the hill, the road makes a blind, more than 90-degree turn.



Left: Approaching this sharp turn in the Bullpasture River Gorge, the rock cliff abuts the road and leans toward the road. There is no shoulder across from the cliff, and the bank falls sharply into the river. All photos were taken on April 16,2018. (Photos courtesy PriscillaMelchior)