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Bath EMS meets with Dominion over safety concerns

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BY MIKE BOLLINGER • STAFF WRITER

HOT SPRINGS — The head of the Bath County Fire and Rescue Association and the county's emergency services coordinator say valuable information came from a meeting with safety representatives from Dominion Energy last Tuesday with regard to the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

The Dominion representatives attended a BCFRA meeting, and association president Harold King said all emergency services departments in the county were represented.

"We had a lot of questions. We got a lot of good data," emergency services coordinator Andy Seabolt said. "We are getting better ideas and more understanding on how to respond during construction. It was good information. It really was. It was an excellent discussion forum. I'm really glad we had that meeting."

Dominion's media relations manager agreed. "We feel that the meeting went very well. Safety is our top priority at Dominion Energy. Our safety and operations leadership was invited to the meeting to answer questions and provide an overview of natural gas pipeline safety and some techniques for responding to events," Karl Neddenien said.

"The meeting was very productive and helped us understand their expectations as well as helping the first responders understand what we would need from them and what we would do in the event of an accident or emergency," Neddenien added. "This is an important step in developing a unified command for responding to an emergency. We will continue to work closely with Bath County first responders during construction and operation of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline."

King said one of the most pleasant surprises was related to roads. "They told us anytime they cross a road, rather than block it or have an open trench, they will try to drill under it or will set up a detour. Emergency vehicles will not have to wait until steel plates are put in place to cross,"

he said. “Our biggest concern was alleviated. They are not going to simply block a road and shut down traffic.”

However, there still could be traffic issues during construction. King said Dominion admitted it will use Muddy Run Road as a main supply artery. “That is a very tight road. There will be semi-trucks much longer than logging trucks carrying three 40-foot sections of 42-inch pipe. If a fire truck or an ambulance has to respond to a call, and they are sending trucks up that road, it could be a problem,” he said.

At the meeting, King suggested the 911 Center have access to Dominion’s project command center during construction. That way, he said, a dispatcher could contact Dominion and let its personnel know there will be emergency traffic on the road and a point to pass could be determined. “They seemed open to it, but didn’t make a commitment,” he said.

Dominion representatives admitted there could be problems with the large trucks, King said. He said company workers will try to eliminate activity during school bus times, and times people will be traveling to and from work. “There is no way around the reality it will cause traffic problems,” King said.

A major result of the meeting for local emergency services was realizing the need for additional planning. King said Bath County needs to include the pipeline in its emergency operations plan.

“This is the first time in the county we have had a major pipeline. We asked if Dominion could participate in those revisions, and they declined to do so. They said they don’t want to accept liability if they told us to do it a certain way,” King said. “They did agree to go through the revisions, to review them and make suggestions.”

King added, “There is a lot of work that needs to be done through the Local Emergency Planning Committee to include the pipeline in our emergency operations guide. Those plans have to be developed and maintained. It gives us a lot to think about.”

“We are getting in mind how to generate plans for when they go live with the pipeline,” Sebolt said. “We will work with other localities that have pipelines to see their standard operating procedures and meld that with the understanding of what we will have here. This is a major transmission line. We have enough information now to start filling in the blanks.”

In particular, Sebolt said, Botetourt County could be a good resource since there are several transmission lines running through that county.

King also said Dominion gave extensive information as to when it will and will not stop the flow of gas through the pipeline and to how to detect possible leaks. He said if there is a minor leak, such as an area where two sections of pipe are joined, there could be a hissing sound, dead grass in the area of the pipeline, or a frosty area. In such cases, local emergency services will be asked to establish a perimeter around the area to keep people out and call the pipeline company, King said. A crew will be dispatched to determine how severe the leak is, and if it’s bad enough, then the flow would be stopped.

“They spent a lot of time explaining chemically what happens in a leak, the concentration of gas, where it goes and what would have to happen for there to be a catastrophic event,” King said. “They didn’t specifically go into the ‘fireball scenario.’”

“We don’t want to scare people to death,” Seabolt added. “The gas dissipates quickly as it goes up. It is not nearly the safety hazard I thought it would be. I feel more comfortable now that we understand some of the physical properties of the gas.”

The county has gas meters that are used mostly in residential situations, Seabolt said. He said there will likely be a need for Bath to obtain combustible gas meters for emergency services.

Seabolt said once a leak is found, it will be determined how critical it is. “We will rely on public safety partners throughout the state. We want to make sure we act with as much regard to public safety as we can,” he said.

“Our basic instructions are if anyone detects a leak, we are to block off the area and call Dominion. They are two-plus hours away. They will go in and take a look, and based on their findings they may or may not throw the valves. It has to be pretty significant leakage before they stop flow. They will have a crew poised in the area before they shut it down,” King said.

Emergency vehicles, King said, have guides that list types of gases. With each substance, those guides list how far back a perimeter should be. “Dominion says we should go with the book and establish a perimeter. They said they will count on local emergency workers to establish and maintain that perimeter,” he said.

The distance needed for a perimeter, Seabolt said, is not always set in stone. “The distance numbers can be hard to guess. The numbers in the emergency response guides are large,” he said.

Should that be necessary for several days, there could be an impact since local emergency workers are volunteers, noted King. In addition, should an evacuation be needed, local resources would be counted on to set up shelters and provide resources. “It is up to the locality to notify citizens, set up evacuation routes and provide gathering places for people,” he said.

“I think our members were a little bit surprised it takes a major event to shut down the flow of gas completely,” King said.

If there is a fire resulting from a pipeline incident, King said local departments do not have the resources necessary to fight it. “We are to try and prevent the spread of fire onto private property and protect homes and property,” he said.

Should there be a major problem, King said, there will be two valve stations in Bath — one in Deerfield and one in Little Valley. “They have the ability to stop the flow and they don’t have to be on site. The valves are automatic and can be controlled from a command center. There are multiple ways they can control the valves — satellite, cell phone signals and hard-wired signals. It will take them three to five minutes to cut the flow off,” King said.

Should there be a fuel spill from a truck or other equipment, King said it would become a hazardous materials incident and local departments would respond appropriately.

In addition, King said Dominion told local EMS the pipeline will be inspected on a regular basis. He said once a year, a device would be run through the pipeline looking for corrosion and other possible problems. He said Dominion would walk the pipeline more frequently than that, and will also fly over it. “They use infrared imagery that can detect temperature differences that would be present if there was a leak,” King said.

“Experienced operators continually monitor the pressure, temperature and flow of the gas through our pipelines using remote sensors positioned along the entire length of the pipeline. They can immediately begin shutting off the flow of gas and isolate individual sections of the pipeline if any issues are detected,” Neddenien said. “Natural gas pipelines are the safest form of energy transportation in the U.S., far safer than transporting fuel by rail or truck.”

Explosions do occur on gas pipelines, but King said Dominion explained the gas is difficult to ignite. “They told us it is fairly difficult to ignite. You have to have the right concentration of oxygen and the proper amount of gas. It has to be just right for ignition to take place,” he said.

Once the pipeline is complete, Seabolt said, people in the area will need to remind themselves to stay aware. “Once we start living with it, it becomes commonplace. People will need to call Miss Utility then more than ever before they dig. That is where they have found the biggest issues. That’s where there can be a big problem. We will have to remind ourselves not to just get in a backhoe in that area and start digging,” he said.

Because the audience was emergency responders, the meeting topics were limited to emergency response. “I feel like emergency services are more prepared now. We are not living in ignorance now, we have enough knowledge to start researching and learning,” Seabolt said.

King said he has other concerns beyond the emergency services realm. “There was no discussion of potential environmental impacts. I have grave concerns about what they are going to do about stream crossings, wetlands and steep slopes,” he said.

He also expressed appreciation to the Dominion representatives who made the presentation. “The guys who were in the room with us are not the bad guys. They are professionals and have a lot of experience. They were very courteous, polite, professional and concerned,” King said. “They are folks hired to do a job. They emphasized again and again their top priorities are the safety of the workers on the pipeline and the citizens of the county.”

Currently, work on the ACP in Virginia is suspended pending court action on several state and federal permits. There is no timetable on when, or if, that work will resume.