

CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

ACP was a pipeline to the past. Now we can focus on a renewable energy future.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD
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At the close of the Fourth of July weekend, Duke Energy and Dominion Energy may have unwittingly declared a new independence – a breakaway from the the tyranny of fossil fuels in generating electricity.

On Sunday, the two big utilities who had partnered in a plan to build the Atlantic Coast Pipeline announced they were giving up on the project. Richmond-based Dominion Energy and Charlotte-based Duke Energy had until recently expressed a strong commitment to the massive project that was becoming increasingly untenable.

The cost of the 600-mile pipeline from the fracking fields of West Virginia through Virginia and North Carolina had climbed from an estimated \$5 billion in 2014 to \$8 billion and rising. The utilities cited legal objections filed by environmental groups and landowners for the rising costs and the pipeline’s shrinking prospects for being a sensible investment.

Predictably, the Trump administration’s anti-regulatory zealots condemned the pipeline’s opponents for blocking the project by using the law and rules against environmental damage.

U.S. Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette said, “The well-funded, obstructionist environmental lobby has successfully killed the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which would have lowered energy costs for consumers in North Carolina and Virginia by providing them with an affordable, abundant and reliable natural gas supply from the Appalachian region.”

What the “obstructionist environmental lobby” actually did was hold off the pipeline long enough that Dominion and Duke could see it was becoming a boondoggle that would have cost them and their ratepayers dearly. The worldwide economic slowdown caused by the pandemic has created a [fossil fuel glut](#) that has [rolled back the fracking industry](#). There is increasing evidence that there would not be enough energy demand or natural gas price stability to justify the volume or the cost of the pipeline.

Those who fought hard against the project deserve the thanks of ratepayers and the utilities. They saved Dominion and Duke from a doomed investment in energy’s past rather than its future.

Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune stressed that point in a statement Sunday: “Duke and Dominion did not decide to cancel the Atlantic Coast Pipeline – the people and frontline organizations that led this fight for years forced them into walking away.”

The project's real obstacle – and the real beneficiary of its collapse – is Mother Nature. On an immediate level, the project threatened to damage pristine forests and waterways and disturb habitats. In the longer term, it would commit utilities to supporting fracking and burning natural gas for decades, even as climate change is accelerating.

Natural gas does burn cleaner than coal – as the utilities emphasize – but leaks during the extracting, storing and transporting of natural gas release large amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas that is a major contributor to global warming.

Despite their gauzy ads about clean natural gas and their commitment to renewable energy, the utilities' plan for the pipeline was a plan for a fossil fuels future. It's urgent that they now pivot toward investment in renewable energy.

Generating electricity from wind, solar and other renewable sources is not only good for the planet, it's good for ratepayers and utilities. Renewable energy is on a path to be cheaper than energy from fossil fuels and it offers a stronger foundation for utilities' business model in the 21st century.

The six-year effort to build the Atlantic Coast Pipeline won't be all folly if it forces Dominion and Duke to embrace a future in which generating electricity and protecting the planet are one and the same.