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Pipeline decision due within 60 days

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BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



Dominion environmental manager Bill Scarpinato, left, and engineer Brittany Moody talked to local historian, Clay Hamilton. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

MONTEREY — Before frost covers the pumpkin.

That's about how long pipeline developer Dominion Resources said it will know whether to proceed with its proposed Southeast Reliability Project.

In front of a much larger crowd than usual for their monthly meeting, Highland supervisors on Tuesday asked for some long-awaited answers from a delegation of Dominion Resources employees about their proposed interstate natural gas transmission pipeline.



Dominion communications vice president Chet Wade: “We would certainly be glad to talk about” providing emergency resources. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Some they got. Some they didn’t.

Twice the allotted time went to questions that followed a Dominion slide presentation introduced by Chet Wade, vice president, corporate communications, about “how we do business and what we stand for,” he said.

“The most important thing is we are here to work with landowners and counties, Wade said. “That doesn’t mean we can always give you the answer you want to hear.”

Wade talked about the “three C’s,” starting with communications. He said he appreciated Highland’s patience since the announcement in mid-May, and that there remained lots of unanswered questions.

“Part of the reason is we’re covered by confidentiality agreements,” he said. Dominion will communicate with communities as much as possible, but the company is in negotiations with potential customers, and those negotiations are confidential, Wade said.

Wade said he expects Dominion will make a decision of whether to move forward with the project within 60 days, or the first week of October, after negotiations are complete. Before then, Dominion will host a community meeting in Highland, he said.

If Dominion decides to proceed, there will be a “robust” review process by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the main agency that oversees pipeline construction, environmental, historical and culture impacts, he said.

The second C is consideration, Wade said. Dominion is trying to be considerate of people while looking for the best route.

Conduct is the third C, he said. “You can expect us to treat you with respect,” Wade said, while building a pipeline that is safe and leaving the community in the way it should be afterward.

He explained Dominion Virginia Power is the largest electric utility in the commonwealth, and owner of the Bath County Pumped Storage Station, which he described as “the largest battery in the world.”

Dominion is also a natural gas company, Wade said. He listed the company’s core values of “safety, ethics, excellence, and one Dominion.”

The company is ranked second to NextEra Energy by Fortune Magazine as the most admired company in the industry, he said. Dominion has invested in environmental controls at its power plants to reduce sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury emissions by as much as 90 percent over 15 years, a Dominion chart showed.

Wade explained Dominion is converting from coal to natural gas for power generation. Resources are plentiful, he said of the Marcellus and surrounding shale formations. “It’s what you’d call the Saudi America of natural gas,” he said.

Businesses and homes need more natural gas, Wade said. “It helps the economy.”

There is a strong demand for natural gas in Virginia and North Carolina, he said. Virginia has a network of natural gas pipelines already. But with one exception, all the gas is transmitted up from the Gulf of Mexico. There’s not a lot of access to Marcellus shale gas for Virginia, he said.

Emmett Toms, manager of legislative state and local affairs for Dominion, described the proposed pipeline as 550 miles long, including a 100-mile spur to Hampton Roads, 42 inches in diameter through West Virginia and Virginia, 36 inches in North Carolina and 20 inches to Hampton Roads. The pipeline capacity would be 1.5 billion feet per day.

Compressor stations would be located at the beginning of the route in West Virginia, in Central Virginia and near the North Carolina state line. He noted the final route has not been chosen and surveys will determine the best one based on landowner input and assessment of environmental, historical and cultural impacts.

“What’s in it for Highland,” Toms said, would include property tax revenue, nearterm employment opportunities, economic activity during construction and economic development opportunities. “Gas offers opportunities to counties that don’t have it,” Toms said.

The project time line consists of surveys through 2014, FERC pre-filing in fall of 2015; FERC application for certificate of public need and necessity in summer of 2016, construction in 2017 and 2018, and beginning of service in 2018, he said.

Of public participation, Toms reiterated there would be an open house in Highland at a yet unannounced time in September, that public officials were informed of the proposal in May and June. Dominion will have open houses over the next two years. He noted Dominion offers high school students an educational scholarship grant.

Toms said the study corridor cuts a 26.3- mile path through Highland, crossing 78 landowner tracts. Of them, 54 percent so far have agreed to surveys. “The other 46 percent we’re still working with,” he said. About eight miles of surveys have been completed, he said.

In terms of rights of way, Toms showed images of treeless open grassy areas where pipelines were buried. He said the rights of way would be 150 feet wide during construction and 75 feet wide when finished. Rights of way can be farmed but no swimming pools or structures could be built on them, he said. Ancillary rights of way will be sought for access routes, he said.

He also talked about survey teams. Toms said he heard comments about ATVs, but said all teams work on foot. There are four types of teams: civil, environmental historical and cultural resources. The total number of people on a team is 10-12, he said.

Toms said Dominion has avoided multiple conservation easements and bypassed the core of the McDowell Battlefield property. The corridor crosses outlying portions of the property

Of what he termed a major concern, “karst soil and limestone,” Toms said all Dominion has to go by is GIS mapping. “We need to get with landowners,” he said. Stream and river crossings are tightly regulated by federal and state laws, he said. Surface water springs and wells will be protected within a 200-foot radius,” Toms said.

The floor was then opened to supervisors’ questions. David Blanchard asked what is Dominion’s responsibility if a water source is ruined by construction activity. Dominion environmental manager Bill Scarpinato replied that FERC says to avoid springs, and they will be studied and evaluated.

Supervisor Lee Blagg said the route would go over several mountain ranges and asked if the pipeline would be above ground.

Wade said he had seen pictures of long expanses of pipeline above ground. “That’s not the case,” he said, explaining this pipeline will be primarily underground.

Chair Kevin Wagner asked about the size of work crews, vehicle sizes, traffic impact and special considerations.

Dominion engineer Brittany Moody said the project would employ between 500 and 800 workers spread over the route. She said videos would be taken of the roads before and after, and roads would be updated after construction.

Wagner pointed out Highland’s fire and rescue teams are all volunteer. He asked if Dominion would require them to be on standby. “With that many people, somebody’s going to get hurt,” he said.

Moody said Dominion would develop safety plans.

Toms added that not all of the workers would be in one county during the life of the two-year project. Wade noted Dominion works closely with the states and counties to make sure precautions are taken with large equipment.

Continuing his line of questioning, Wagner asked if there would be preparations with emergency responders. Moody replied Dominion would meet with them and the schools before the project.

County attorney Melissa Dowd said sometimes contractors have their own medical people. “We are a remote county,” she said, with limited volunteer resources, equipment and skills. She asked if Dominion would pony up additional resources.

“We would certainly be glad to talk to you about that,” Wade said.

“Working closely is not the same as providing additional rescue” resources, Dowd replied.

Wade said Dominion could not negotiate an agreement that night.

Moody said there is something different in every project, and Dominion would analyze the question.

“It’s an important issue,” Dowd said.

Toms explained contractors generally have their own safety people and emergency medical technicians.

Blagg asked how deep the pipeline would be buried. Trench depths would range from 10 to 12 feet, Toms said.

Blanchard said there would be roughly three crossings of U.S. 250. He asked if Dominion would bore under the highway or excavate.

“That’s a VDOT negotiation,” Toms replied. Dominion tries to bore when it can, Moody added.

Blanchard asked if, when a farmer is told he has a 125-foot swath across his land, his farming operation would be interrupted.

Toms said every property is different. Ditch plugs, or breakers, could allow access from one side of the field to the other. If impractical, Dominion would compensate for loss of harvest, he said. During restoration, fencing would be replaced with like or improved materials. If the farmer has another area for livestock, Dominion would move the livestock or bring in extra hay or water, he said.

“The gorilla in the room is eminent domain,” Wagner said. “What experience does Dominion have with eminent domain,” and what law firms does it employ, he asked.

“We don’t want to get there,” Wade said. “Ninety-five percent of the time, we don’t.” He said Dominion works hard with each landowner and FERC decides public need and necessity. He said it was premature to talk about law firms. “At this point we wouldn’t know the firm. It could be different firms.”

Wagner asked if all the survey letters have been sent.

Ramona Kanouff, Dominion manager of land acquisition, explained that Virginia statute calls for two groups of letters, 15 days apart. “We don’t know the route of the pipeline,” she said. “In mountainous areas we need access.”

“So probably not yet,” Wagner replied.

Blanchard asked how close to a house a pipeline could be buried. Moody replied that it could be within 25 feet.

Blanchard asked about the length of the process if a landowner denies survey access.

Kanouff explained Dominion would continue to work with the landowner. “If someone declines entry, we won’t enter the property,” she said, noting the time frame depends on the availability of a judge and the court system.

“Our goal is not to get there,” Wade stressed.

“When you presented this project, the board of supervisors’ bottoms fell out,” Blanchard said. “As we come up to speed, there will be lots of environmental questions.”

Wade said having been through the FREC regulatory process, he was certain there would be more documentation than anyone would want to read. “It’s a very public, open process,” he said.

He said interested individuals can visit the project website at dom.com/sepipeline or email sepipeline@dom.com.

Toms said there would be a toll-free number for the project at the open house in September.

Wagner asked how Dominion interacts with the national forest. Scarpinato explained Dominion has met with NFS staff multiple times in both Monongahela and George Washington. Talks are ongoing and a study corridor is yet to be determined in each.

Dowd asked if Dominion could use its existing right of way in Highland for the proposal. Toms replied that Dominion does not have any current right of way.

“You mean Dominion doesn’t have any right of way anywhere in Highland?” Dowd asked.

Scarpinato said the company has electric transmission right of way in the southern end of Highland. “We have looked at colocation opportunities,” he said, adding that an electric transmission line has the ability to span over rugged terrain. He said a pipeline would present construction restoration issues. “Power lines are not always conducive” to natural gas pipelines, he said.

“You’re not using any existing easement in Highland,” Dowd said.

Wagner asked about “dirty” gas versus “clean” gas. Toms replied this would be a high-pressure line that transmits gas from a processing plant and would not allow fracking in Highland.

Wagner wrapped up the discussion, and said he looked forward to more dialogue with Dominion.