

Roanoke Times

Gubernatorial candidates comment, or choose not to, on Mountain Valley Pipeline

- **Laurence Hammack**
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Construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline comes through Doe Creek Farm in Giles County.
HEATHER ROUSSEAU, The Roanoke Times

Four years ago, Terry McAuliffe was a high-profile supporter of the Mountain Valley Pipeline as it prepared to break ground on the largest natural gas pipeline ever built in Virginia.

As governor, McAuliffe said the abundant and affordable energy from Mountain Valley and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline — a similar project that has since been cancelled amid fierce opposition — was essential to the state’s economic health.

But now, as McAuliffe seeks a second term as a Democrat, he has grown silent about Mountain Valley.

In response to written questions submitted by The Roanoke Times, the McAuliffe campaign never mentioned the pipelines while promising to push for Virginia to have 100% clean energy by 2035.

His opponent, Republican Glenn Youngkin, likewise did not grant a request for an interview or respond specifically to emailed questions. A campaign spokesperson referred to comments Youngkin made at two recent debates, which included his opposition to the Virginia Clean Economy Act, which requires the state’s two major utilities to be carbon-free by 2050.

Only Princess Blanding, who is running as a third-party, Liberation candidate, agreed to talk about Mountain Valley.

“As governor, I will absolutely put an end to this Mountain Valley Pipeline project,” Blanding said, citing not just the pollution caused by building a giant natural gas infrastructure, but also the way the company has used eminent domain to take the land of people who stood in its way.

Although McAuliffe and Youngkin did not comment, Blanding said it’s clear to her that they are “putting profits and politics over people.”

All three candidates were asked if they supported or opposed the pipeline, and if their initial positions had changed in light of Mountain Valley’s repeated violations of erosion and sediment control regulations since work began in 2018.

The Roanoke Times also inquired if the candidates believed that state regulators and the company had responded appropriately to the violations, which led to Mountain Valley paying \$2.15 million as part of a consent decree.

And McAuliffe, Youngkin and Blanding were asked if that and other fines, \$27.5 million that Mountain Valley paid to Virginia to mitigate for tree-cutting and other environmental impacts in 2018, and its more recent \$19.5 million contribution to conservation groups were enough to compensate for the damage it has caused.

In an emailed response, McAuliffe spokesperson Renzo Olivari wrote that “as Virginia’s next governor, Terry will accelerate Virginia’s path to 100% clean energy by 2035 and create good jobs of the future, invest in energy efficiency, and decarbonize Virginia’s transportation sector.”

The statement also pointed to McAuliffe’s record of fighting against global warming, his support of the U.S. Paris Climate Agreement, and his work in 2016 to grow solar energy jobs in the state by 65%.

Youngkin’s response, which consisted of a printout of his answers to questions during two debates with McAuliffe, explained why he opposes the Virginia Clean Economy Act.

“I believe that, in fact, we can tackle bringing down emissions in Virginia without putting forth a plan that not even executives at the utilities believe is doable,” he said. “It’s gonna, in fact, increase Virginian’s bills by up to \$1,000 a year, it puts our entire energy grid at risk.”

While McAuliffe supports accelerating the clean-energy act’s goals by 15 to 20 years, Youngkin called for a more measured approach.

“I believe in all energy sources, we can use wind and solar, but we need to preserve our clean natural gas and we can, in fact, have a reliable energy grid,” he said at the second debate with McAuliffe.

The Virginia League of Conservation Voters is endorsing McAuliffe, despite the organization’s strong opposition to both the Atlantic Coast and Mountain Valley projects and its work “to ensure the MVP is never realized,” deputy director Lee Francis said.

“We are confident that Terry McAuliffe is the right person for the job of Governor to protect and build off the incredible progress Virginia has made the last few years addressing our climate crisis while also making Virginia better for both business and workers,” Francis wrote in an email.

“Governor McAuliffe gets it — a strong economy, clean energy and a healthy workforce all go hand-in-hand.”

Four years ago, when Gov. Ralph Northam was running to replace McAuliffe, pipelines were more of a campaign issue than they seem to be today.

Atlantic Coast, which was proposed to run closer to more populated areas than Mountain Valley, generated lots of controversy in part because it was financed by Dominion Energy. Work on the pipeline was stalled by legal challenges from environmental groups, and in July 2020 Dominion and its partner, Duke Energy, cancelled the project.

Mountain Valley moved forward, although slowed by the same legal attacks, and is now largely completed, it says.

At a Sept. 28 public hearing, project head Robert Cooper told the State Water Control Board that there were “challenges” controlling muddy runoff

during times of record rainfall, but the problems have since been worked out.

However, the company must still obtain a permit from the board that would allow it to cross the remaining streams and wetlands in its path. The board, whose citizen members are appointed by the governor, is expected to make a decision at its meeting in December.

Opponents say the pipeline's erosion problems — and its contribution to climate change once it starts delivering 2 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day — remain unresolved. They are pushing the water board to reject the permit.

The way Blanding sees it, the state's oversight has been too light, and the fines imposed for violations too little, to stop Mountain Valley from completing a pipeline that was a bad idea from the start.

"It should never have been given a green light in the first place," she said.

As for McAuliffe and Youngkin, "their silence is violence," Blanding said. "And they're playing the easy card by not responding at all."