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FERC hears fervent arguments for and against pipeline

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STUARTS DRAFT — Federal officials listened to about a 100 residents offer their opinion on Dominion's proposed natural gas pipeline for a report that will be used to decide on a permit for the project.

The first two dozen people who commented for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's scoping meeting was more balanced between opponents and supporters than previous meetings. Opposition voices were in the majority halfway through the list.

Applause following the individual speakers indicated a significant majority in the audience who are against the local route for the 550-mile line, which would bring natural gas from West Virginia to North Carolina.

Bruce Rinker, executive director of the Valley Conservation Council, garnered audible support from about three quarters of the crowd after his comments, which emphasized the importance of the forests along the route of the proposed corridor.

"Our forests are our heritage," Rinker said. "They are not the exclusive domain of a for-profit company invested in fossil fuels."

Rinker offered the council's board of directors as an advisory panel to help find alternative routes along existing utility right-of-ways so that it would disturb fewer environmentally sensitive areas.

Others urged the audience to consider the country's need for cheaper, less-polluting energy sources that would keep electricity bills lower.

David Amerine, a Mount Solon resident who supports Dominion's proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline, said alternative power sources such as wind and solar don't provide enough electricity to replace coal-burning plants being shuttered.

Natural gas is the best available alternative, Amerine said.

"We believe it will safely provide clean fuel to a region that needs it to support economic development," he said. The project will also generate needed jobs, Amerine added.

The federal regulatory agency will review Dominion's permit application to build the pipeline, which the company has proposed in partnership with three other energy firms. FERC received the oral comments to help put together an environmental impact statement on the project.

The five-member commission will eventually decide whether to grant the permit, which would let Dominion force property or land-use sales through eminent domain.

Michael Shull, chairman of the Augusta County Board of Supervisors, submitted a statement on behalf of the county government, urging federal regulators to take into consideration construction hazards and property rights, among other factors.

Pastures Supervisor Tracy Pyles, who is chairman of the Augusta County Service Authority, spoke passionately of the need to protect Augusta's unique water sources.

Nancy Sorrells, co-chair of the opposition group Augusta County Alliance, told federal representatives that the pipeline corridor under study for the line risks too many natural resources.

Judy Armstrong, who worked as a real estate broker in the region for more than three decades, said her experience demonstrates that existing natural gas pipelines depress property values.

"People know that land is tainted, and they won't buy it," Armstrong said.

Stuarts Draft resident Don Cogar was among the voices who spoke in support of the project, telling FERC representatives that industry has to get energy sources to markets. Cogar said he feels for property owners affected by construction, but most people benefited from utility easements.

"Every one of us that has a public utility in our house ... somebody gave it easement to get to your house," Cogar said.

Wild Virginia and the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition asked FERC to extend the review period so that more detailed information could be gathered on the project.

The Stuarts Draft event was the eighth of 10 scoping meetings the agency is holding to gather comments from communities along the pipeline's study corridor.

FERC officials kept to a strict, three-minute limit on comments. The crowd was generally restrained during the meeting over the emotionally charged utility proposal. At one point, though, a State Police trooper had to order a pipeline opponent to sit down when he stood up to object to comments being given by a pipeline supporter.