

Fishersville event draws pipeline backers, opponents

Calvin Trice

- The Federal Energy Regulatory Committee will hold its own series of meetings this year.

FISHERSVILLE – At Dominion’s latest open house to provide information on a proposed natural gas pipeline that would run through Augusta County, many among the hundreds who turned out found colorful ways to take matters into their own hands.

Inside and outside Augusta Expo, they demonstrated with a prop, held signs aloft, chanted, sang and argued energy policy with their opponents.

Jennifer Lewis and pipeline opponents marched around the Expo parking lot holding up a replica tube that was 42 inches wide to represent the diameter of the underground pipeline.

“Pipelines corrode! Leak and explode!” they chanted.

At the company’s September open house at the same location, the company attracted scarcely any vocal supporters for its proposal to run a \$5 billion underground pipeline through the area.

On Wednesday, a portion of the turnout was adamant in support.

Staunton resident John Wilson said he understands the safety concerns surrounding the pipeline, but thinks opponents have overstated them. Wilson supports developing natural gas.

“It’s probably not as good as I think it is. It’s certainly not as bad as some people think it is,” Wilson said. “As with most things, it’s somewhere in the middle, but I’m for cheaper energy.”

He held up a sign that said “Pro Pipeline,” and stood behind one of the yard signs with the words, “Energy Jobs,” posted around the event that competed with the more abundant anti-pipeline signs.

Alex Avery used his own money to make the signs in support of Dominion, and held up a sign with the words “Pipelines Promise Prosperity.” In a spontaneous debate at the Expo that became heated, Avery said, “I don’t want to pay for your solar subsidies anymore!”

In front of them, Harrisonburg resident Sherrie Good, held up one of the opposition signs.

She doesn’t think the company is being honest about the safety of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

“They’re saying how safe it is, but they’re really on untested ground because they’ve never built a pipeline that wide and through this type of terrain,” Good said.

Inside the main Expo building, a majority of the crowd bore opposition clothes or stickers. The open house is one of a series Dominion must hold along the 550-mile pipeline study corridor that runs from West Virginia to North Carolina.

Most people who came stood in the long line that formed to speak with representatives of the Federal Energy Regulatory Committee, which is reviewing Dominion’s permit application for the project.

Churchville resident William Little, whose property lies along the corridor Dominion is surveying for the pipeline, asked agency officials about threats the project would cause to his home’s foundation and well water.

Little filed a lawsuit to keep Dominion workers and contractors from surveying his property for the pipeline. He wasn't happy with the reassurances from federal officials that his resources would be studied properly.

"I really didn't take a whole lot of faith in what their answer was," Little said.

Dominion has run into the most opposition to its surveys in Augusta and Nelson counties and has urged property owners to cooperate so that sensitive areas wouldn't be disturbed if the pipeline is approved. With the permit, the company could take land through forced sales.

The company announced recently that because one property owner in Nelson allowed more of the route through his land, 14 other parcels were removed from the corridor.

Ninety minutes after the open house began, pipeline opponents recited a protest song near the line for those waiting to speak with energy committee representatives.