

Protestors call for McAuliffe to reject pipeline

- Michelle Mitchell
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Pipeline protesters rally before Governor McAuliffe's talk at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton, Wednesday morning.

STAUNTON - Chants rang out with signs held high, as protestors lined up outside the Stonewall Jackson Hotel Wednesday morning. Augusta County residents stood side-by-side with those from Nelson and Buckingham counties, among others, as each made it clear they want the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline and Mountain Valley Pipeline projects shut down.

“Call it off McAuliffe!” and “No Pipeline!” the protestors chanted as Gov. Terry McAuliffe’s car rolled up to the hotel. McAuliffe went inside to give a speech, as the protestors stood outside.

Ron Enders, a landowner in Afton, said he just wanted the governor to take time and listen to another side of the argument.

“I’m very disappointed. He is a professional politician,” Enders said. “I would expect that he would have been willing to meet with us, talk about his side, and hear about our side. We elected him, not Dominion, but he doesn’t seem to be willing to meet with us or talk with us.”

The Atlantic Coast Pipeline is a 550-mile natural gas project stretching from West Virginia to North Carolina. Last September, McAuliffe endorsed the project, saying it would create jobs, including new manufacturing options. Local residents are concerned about what impact it might have, as nearly 43 miles of the project stretches through Augusta County and into neighboring areas.

Enders’ property is one of those areas, as currently the pipeline would cut through his land along Route 151. On Wednesday, Enders held a “No Pipeline” sign, saying he just wanted McAuliffe to hear him out.

“He needs to come and talk to the people that he’s supposedly representing; we’d like to talk to him. He’s listening to the Dominion side. They’re not telling him the facts,” Enders said. “I think he should represent the people and not the corporations”

Waynesboro resident Jennifer Lewis, who works as president of the anti-pipeline group Friends of Augusta, said she hoped protestors could change McAuliffe’s mind about the project.

“He is a vocal supporter of the pipeline which obviously we disagree with him,” Lewis said.

One main argument from protestors is that Dominion Resources, one of the operating groups behind the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, should focus less on natural gas and more on alternative energy sources.

“I’m looking at solar power now,” Enders said. “We’ve requested to work with the solar power company on my home. I’m really excited about that.”

One of the issues about solar energy however is the cost involved. A smaller system runs about \$10,000, while a larger unit can cost around \$30,000. Dominion and other companies have invested in smaller wind and solar projects, but argue that it’s not cost effective to do that on a larger scale right now.

Pipeline is a federal issue

McAuliffe did address the pipeline issue Wednesday, after speaking to the Shenandoah Valley Partnership. He pointed out that Virginia has no say as to if the project gets approved, so he couldn’t call it off, as protestors suggested.

"At the end of the day, the issue is one for the federal government," McAuliffe explained. He pointed out that the pipeline has to be approved the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, not any group in Virginia. Currently, Dominion and its partners have not even submitted a final route for the project or a complete application. That’s expected to happen later this fall.

McAuliffe however said he remains a strong supporter of the pipeline. Describing it as a game-changer, he said Wednesday that it would bring affordable energy to the commonwealth, along with new jobs.

Protestors were not surprised, pointing out that McAuliffe took money from Dominion during his run for governor. Records do show that in 2013, McAuliffe received \$125,000 from Dominion as a campaign contribution. By comparison however, environmental groups gave McAuliffe far more. The Virginia League of Conservation Voters donated \$1.699 million, while NextGen Climate Action gave him \$1.625 million. Also the Sierra Club's Virginia chapter donated \$468,222 to McAuliffe's 2013 run for governor.

“When he was running for governor, he touted ‘clean energy, I’m going to be this green energy guy,’ well he’s supporting this pipeline,” Lewis said.

She added the protestors would not give up, and plan to follow McAuliffe around Virginia.

“We just want him to know that when he pulls up, anywhere he pulls up in Virginia, we’re going to be there,” Lewis said.