

When visitors arrived for the annual Blue Grass 4th of July parade and celebration, they got a peek at the new pavilion, finished in the nick of time. Volunteers and Ruritan members came after working hours for days upon days to get the structure finished in time, while other members provided dinner and refreshments to the tired workers. We must say, it's a mighty fine addition to the club — one that will make events like this even more enjoyable. This year, the club had its biggest turnout ever for the Fourth. We hope all those who had fun will consider a donation of any size to the Ruritans, who are still working to raise enough for other building needs. The club has served its community well over the years; let's show our support for what they do. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)



Pipeline project: Counties deserve details

What happened to Dominion Resources?

While two meetings between Dominion staff and county officials were held in West Virginia to explain about plans for a gas pipeline through three states, Dominion canceled two others, in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, and Nelson County, Virginia.

Seems to us a case of haves and have-nots. Some counties get timely meetings. Others don't. But when you are a mega-wealthy corporation, you can call all the shots you want to — and avoid public engagement.

Dominion's Jim Norvelle told us, "We postponed the meetings because the project is still in its earliest stages, and we had nothing new to add. We will reschedule those presentations at later dates to be determined. We will also schedule open houses along the route to present information to the public."

We have understood since this spring that the interstate gas transmission pipeline project is in its early stages, but it doesn't seem too early to at least tell citizens along the route what Dominion has in mind. Sending survey letters to landowners without a public meeting first, to announce whatever details are available, was a surefire way to get folks here riled up.

If Dominion decides to build this pipeline, it has already gotten off on the wrong foot with citizens and county officials. Sending representatives to counties who have requested a meeting seems like a simple way to show respect, even if there's not much to report on the proposal, and answer questions about gas pipelines and their impacts.

Highland should demand such a meeting, as we've said before.

We are contemplating the outcry of Nelson County — by its citizens and its supervisors. Could Highland learn a few things from these folks?

First, two groups of Nelson citizens opposed to the project formed to share information. Then, they petitioned their supervisors to organize a meeting with Dominion so they could learn more. Nelson supervisors listened loud and clear, and passed a stunning and gutsy resolution that basically told Dominion to put up or shut up.

And, we learned this week that there is a group, "Free Nelson," that offers a team of nonviolent protesters to Nelson landowners who request one when surveyors are on their property. Imagine that.

Nelson County is setting a fine example of local government and citizens asserting their rights regardless of legal or logistical obstacles. That board's resolution doesn't bar Dominion from proceeding with its plans to survey, but it does speak quite effectively to the board's concerns and citizens' concerns. It's a proactive, not reactive, position to protect the county's interests.

Highland County over the course of decades has often been accused of "reacting" to issues instead of creating ordinances that would protect the county on everything from water supplies to environmental protections and major developments. Few changes get made until something happens to force discussion and action.

We understand why this happens — we have only three supervisors, a small county staff, and little in the way of financial resources. Ultimately, these fine folks, who are often underpaid and overworked, do their best just to keep the basic functions of local government running smoothly. And they do that very, very well.

But we've heard our supervisors say from time to time they wish the planning commission would review such issues and bring proposed ordinances to the board for consideration. Highland does not have a full-time planning director like Sherry Ryder in Bath, and it would help if the county could afford one. Not having one scrolls up the pressure on our planning commission that is expected to get ahead of the important ways Highland should protect itself from damaging development. Our planners need to be commended for doing an indispensable, yet utterly thankless, job. Two of the commission's five seats are currently vacant. We can't help but think they are too often the object of blame, and hence the difficulty in filling these essential positions. Maybe if two more such competent people as planners Sue Cornelius, Harry Sponaule and Bill Rich stepped up to the plate, then our county would be better equipped to address the challenges ahead. One of them

needs to be from the town. Any interested town resident should contact the town office. The other needs to be from the county and interested individuals should contact the county administrator's office.

We're encouraged that Highlanders for Responsible Development is considering public engagement, and whatever their decision will be next week deserves support and respect. If there's a right we need to protect, we need to fight and change the law. New Yorkers did that recently — they banned fracking in their state, and the courts upheld it.

Here's the thing — if we do not fight for what we need, fight to protect what we value, regardless of legal obstacles or vague, impossible to interpret restrictions, we will consistently be vulnerable and our citizens' and property rights will sit prey to any developer. We've seen it happen far too often, and here we are again.

Dominion is a powerful, wealthy utility with all the laws on its side. Granted, citizens in this county rely on the lifeblood of electricity and new climate change rulings are spurring the conversion from coal to natural gas. Nonetheless, citizens deserve Dominion's respect and not its worn-out lip service of "taking pride" in landowner relations. Taxpaying landowners deserve better than that. They deserve their county's support in protecting what they own. Just speak up and demand better. Landowners deserve to know what their options are, at minimum. It's up to our elected officials to decide whether Highland should call on Dominion to talk to us.

While its resolution does not carry the force of law, Nelson County has made it clear it is paying attention to Dominion's proposal and is not very happy about the way it is being handled. Highland should at least consider doing the same, and it has a great example to follow.

This project, if built, would affect not just the landowners here but every citizen and generations of people for decades. This is not the time to sit back and wait to see what Dominion does. Localities that react that way lose to major development and corporate interests. Localities that don't look more like Nelson County.

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