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Concerns linger following gas pipeline open house

BY JOHN BRUCE AND ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITERS



Emergency services coordinator Harley Gardner, right, asked Dominion about incident management. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

MONTEREY — About 250 county officials, landowners and members of the general public passed through The Highland Center Tuesday during Dominion Resources' open house on its proposed 550-mile interstate gas pipeline.

Some were in favor of building the pipeline, some were opposed to it, and some were ambivalent, but the event went smoothly.

Mayor Rich Holman left the building less than satisfied after walking through the table-top displays and exhibits Tuesday.

"Nothing you can say will make me feel good about this," Holman told one of the more than two-dozen spokesmen from Dominion and its contractors who fielded questions

about the Atlantic Coast Pipeline proposal.

Between 500 and 600 people in the town of Monterey and environs are served by the three wells that provide water for the municipal water system, and the pipeline route sits just to the south of Monterey.

Holman said he wondered:

- If Dominion could guarantee, in writing, these wells and the water they produce will not be harmed during pipeline construction nor afterward.
- If damage or loss of water occurs, will Dominion take care of the damage and/or drill new replacement wells if necessary?
- What plans are there for providing fresh water for crews and any other purpose during construction?



This graphic is one of several now posted to the Highlanders for Responsible Development web site, which was recently updated. It shows the potential pipeline route as proposed by Dominion Resources, where it could cross the historic Dividing Waters Farm in Hightown, owned by the Hevener family.

Holman said he would press Dominion for answers.



Mayor Rich Holman asked a Dominion spokesman about the project. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Holman was pleased with a Sept. 10 resolution passed by neighboring Augusta County

supervisors requiring the pipeline proposal follow the county rezoning process. “It is a great example of taking a stand that means something,” the mayor said.

The Augusta board’s action requires Dominion to go through “the full process of the rezoning, which calls for the planning commission to review the application, compile comments from impacted agencies including, but not limited to, VDOT, National Park Service, Health Department, Augusta County

Service Authority, Augusta County Schools, Economic Development Authority, Engineering, Zoning, and Planning Professionals and conduct a Public Hearing for input from our residents,” the resolution states. “And as is the requirement of the Code all landowners in and adjacent to the proposed change of property use and rights will be notified of the proposal and their right to be heard at the Public Hearing.”

Dominion moved its Augusta open house in Verona the night before Highland’s event from the government center to a private venue due to workplace concerns. Dominion’s open house tour continued with appearances in Nelson County Tuesday night and Upshur County, W.Va. Wednesday night. The events were staffed by spokesmen “experts” specializing in specifics such as environment, rights of way, engineering and operations, regulatory concerns and public affairs.



Dominion representatives fielded questions from supervisors chair Kevin Wagner, left. (Recorder photo by John

Rick Webb presented the Augusta resolution requiring rezoning during the open house to supervisor Kevin Wagner.

Wagner looked over the papers and said he would ask the county attorney to review it. **Bruce)**

Webb also showed the resolution to supervisor David Blanchard, saying a similar resolution in Highland would be a good way to help keep the focus on Highland County issues early in the process. “It’s an obvious thing to do,” Webb said.

In another significant turn of events, Wagner learned during the open house that last week, Dominion adopted a “tap policy” that would allow Highland and other localities traversed by the pipeline to draw natural gas for local use.

While walking through the open house, Wagner asked where the workers would stay, and was told contractors tend to bring RVs to the work sites, where they use campgrounds.

“We don’t have that (campground site) set up, but we could work on it,” Wagner said. “That’s the kind of thing the county needs to know about.”

Wagner also wondered about opportunities for local loggers when trees are felled for the pipeline, noting they need to know what the requirements are for working for Dominion before they get shut out.

Dominion representatives explained the company hires a contractor that specializes in clearing trees, and they weren’t sure if the contractor would hire local loggers.

“Can we find out their requirements?” Wagner asked.

“Again, we’re still in the preliminary stages,” he was told.

“Well if they’re going to need special training to make them competitive, I want to know that. I’d like to see if our local workforce could be tied in.”

Dominion explained the company will use a portal on its website for suppliers and vendors interested in opportunities to work on the project.

Dominion told Wagner that numerous inspectors will be involved as the project gets under way. A project manager will be assigned by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, and Dominion hires an independent team of inspectors who answer to FERC. “Inspectors will be on site all the time,” one told Wagner. “We hire an outside firm that works directly for FERC and is 100 percent under FERC’s direction.”

Wagner asked whether state agencies would have their own inspectors as well, and Dominion representatives said they didn’t know, and couldn’t speak for those agencies.

Another told Wagner there was no longer any other competitive pipeline project; once Dominion won the bid for this one, it’s the only one chosen by Duke Energy. And, Wagner was told, 92 percent of the pipeline’s capacity has been secured with customers.

“What happens when things go wrong?” Wagner asked.

Dominion explained there are special contractors who do the work, and they have their own safety professionals.

Wagner also learned the ditch for the pipe will be open in sections for as long as a month at a time, and it will have safety fences for protection. Dominion explained it looks carefully at the safety records of the contractors it hires.

Highland emergency services coordinator Harley Gardner attended and said he was concerned about Dominion stretching Highland's thin resources in the event of an emergency. He said he was told that pipeline contractors would have their own safety personnel and that he was relatively satisfied with Dominion's safety program.

But Gardner pointed back over his shoulder and said, "These aren't the people that can answer the questions I have." For instance, with respect to first responders, Gardner wanted to know about maintaining a perimeter around an incident. "No details were offered," he said.

He said that safety details are important because he was told the pipeline would operate at 12,000 to more than 14,000 pounds of pressure per square inch.

Gardner asked about access during emergency response and was told a patient would be brought to the rescue vehicle from the job site. Gardner said it was good that Dominion wanted to hear more about Highland's limited emergency response capabilities. "They've offered training as time goes on," Gardner said.

Landowner Daniel Hotz said the pipeline was not only bad news for his 50 acres on the eastern slope of Jack Mountain, 4.5 miles east of Monterey on U.S. 250, it was bad news for the county, period. The pipeline as proposed would pass 180 feet from a drinking water spring that feeds his rental property and a neighbor. His house sits about 300 yards from the proposed path, which crosses between 2,000 and 2,500 feet of his property.

"If I lose renters, I lose income," said Hotz, who has worked as a Realtor for nine years and as a stone mason for 20 years.

He said he has heard lots of opposition, a lot of people who don't have an opinion about the proposal, but no one in favor. "I don't see any benefit in any way, shape or form," he said. "It's going to affect my income, I know."

From his perspective as a real estate professional, he said he feels the pipeline will be bad for business. Hotz said people take an interest as potential buyers because of what doesn't exist in their urban areas. "People come here for the seclusion and clear air," he said.

Hightown landowner Mike Hughes said he felt that the pipeline appears to be a done deal.

"To see what a *fait accompli* this is, all you have to do is look at that map," he said, gesturing toward a study corridor graphic. "Here's the least populated county through the entire route, and almost all the land is under private ownership."

Hughes made a commitment 25 years ago to make his land his retirement home. That can't change now because the value has dropped so much that no one would want to buy it because of the pipeline, he said.

Mark and Cindy Swecker own about 800 acres on Lantz Mountain they use mainly for recreation. The pipeline patch crosses more than a half-mile across their property. Swecker said he was not opposed to the proposal. Swecker said his biggest concern is a spring within 100 feet of the pipeline path. He said that while he was satisfied with the communications he has had with the land agent, "They have a lot of work to do."

Though she couldn't attend the open house, town council member Cody Cohen asked The Recorder to pose her questions to Dominion.

"It has to do with what I'm reading on social media concerning those in Highland County who are for the pipeline, and where they're getting their information," she said. One social media site showed a county resident offering to make pro-pipeline signs.

"Why do they think that this project is going to employ large amounts of people from Highland County? Why do they think that this project is going to put more children into our school system? Why do they think that this is going to generate tax money? I really just want to know how and why would this particular project be a good change for Highland County?"

"I've been to one meeting involving Dominion, and one involving Highlanders for Responsible Development, and I didn't leave either one thinking that any of this would happen. Dominion needs to address this," Cohen said.

Dominion spokesman Jim Norvelle said pipeline construction companies have said they bring in 50 percent of the labor and look for the region to supply the other half. "But I can understand these comments, what with Highland County having the smallest population of any county in Virginia. So the 'region' in this case is certainly broader than any one county," Norvelle said.

There will be a property tax revenue increase for Highland County once the pipeline is in the ground, he said. "We will have an estimate on that impact in a few weeks."

Dominion manager of facility planning Jeff Dowdell said he did not think the project would add to the number of students, but there would be an uptick in local sales during construction.

Blanchard asked why the pipeline needed to be so big.

Dominion explained that moving 1.5 billion cubic feet of gas required the 42-inch line; using multiple parallel lines was an option, but one bigger line would have less impact on the environment.

One Dominion representative told Blanchard there was between 18-30 billion cubic feet of gas from the shale basins, available through 2030.

The team involved in putting together Dominion's application to FERC for a certificate told Blanchard how thoroughly the pipeline route is studied. "This is by far our largest project," one told him. "But we

shake the bushes; we study it; there could be 10,000 documents we submit that FERC will analyze ... this is a very stringent, detailed process.”

The Dominion representative went on that when FERC holds a hearing, anyone can raise any kind of concern. “If they raise concerns we have not addressed, FERC will come back to us and pepper us with questions about the proposal. They’ll make us address those concerns.”

Another told Blanchard that what impressed him about the inspectors at the project was how hard they work to protect the environment. “These inspectors are here every day. These guys watch the weather, and if they see there’s a storm coming, the night before, they’re getting all their erosion and sediment control safety guards in place ... there are whole crews that that’s all they do. When we say we protect the environment, we mean it.” The environmental team associated with the project has about 75 people, another told Blanchard, but the best “inspectors,” he said, are citizens who watch for issues and alert Dominion to problems.

FERC requires a “complaint resolution line” for this purpose. However, Dominion told Blanchard the company and its contractors encourage citizens to talk to construction folks. “They want to know what’s going on,” he said. “We have to abide by all these permits, but something can still go wrong.”

Blanchard told Dominion about those who hold doubts a pipeline this big can be constructed in the area’s steep mountain terrain.

“We can cross these mountains,” a Dominion spokesman said, noting how such pipelines have been built in the Rocky Mountains.

Blanchard asked other Dominion representatives about construction and gas leaks. Dominion explained the line is installed in 40-foot segments. Each joint is welded above ground, then x-rayed for cracks or defects before being lowered into the trench. Then, the line is tested by filling the pipe with water far above the amount of pressure the gas will be under. “We have a rigorous inspection program,” he told Blanchard, noting it falls under the Department of Transportation, which requires monthly inspection compliance.

Also, every five years, the line is inspected for corrosion and other issues.

The line is monitored remotely from Clarksburg, W.Va., and sections of the line can be shut down from there.

Blanchard echoed Gardner’s comments about the local emergency service workers in Highland. “They are 100 percent volunteer,” he told Dominion. “And they’re already taxed; it’s hard to add something else to their list to worry about. If you have a problem here, it could be catastrophic ... You hear about gas breaks, you hear about explosions and 30-foot craters. It does happen.”

“Our intent is never to have a leak, but we’re realistic,” Dominion told Blanchard. The spokesman explained Dominion will meet regularly with emergency services volunteers and talk about how to respond. He said they don’t necessarily want local volunteers to be the primary responders. “We want them to give us a safe area and let us deal with it,” he said. “The safest way to deal with it is to shut off the gas and let it burn.”

He said Dominion will compensate volunteer services following an emergency. “We make lots of contributions to these groups,” he said.

Following his tour through the discussions, Blanchard said he hoped Dominion truly understood the environmental concerns in Highland. “As large as this project is, as presented, I hope it’s not so wrapped up in the political process that it loses checks and balances,” he said. “That’s why we should always ask questions and be skeptical.”

Pre-filing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is set for some time this fall, in the first of a two-part, two-year federal regulatory review.

Another pipeline is proposed to the west by NextEra Energy, known as the Mountain Valley Project. An early September news account said that partner EQT Corp. and NextEra are moving forward with the proposed 330-mile Mountain Valley Pipeline, announcing they’ll hold a binding open season for its transmission capacity.

In a news release, EQT said it has received firm capacity commitments of 1.5 billion cubic feet per day. The line would provide at least 2 billion cubic feet per day of transmission capacity. The Dominion pipeline’s capacity would be capacity 1.5 billion cubic feet per day.

Plans for a third pipeline proposed by Spectra Energy on a north-south route through the Shenandoah Valley were canceled this summer.

Virginia expansion plans for a fourth, already existing pipeline, the Transco pipeline, were approved in 2013.

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