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Power line opponents circle the wagons

By: John H. Arundel

Opponents of Dominion Virginia Power's plan to string transmission lines across the Piedmont's placid and historic landscape circled their wagons around Washington, D.C. Tuesday.

They provided federal regulators with impassioned narratives about how their lives would be impacted by the 500-kv power lines and the huge towers that would hold them.

The outspoken crowd started arriving early for the Department of Energy hearing at a Crystal City hotel ballroom across from the Pentagon. Some arrived in clean power cars, carpools and rented buses.

Speakers ran the economic gamut, from wealthy landowners in crisp blue suits to farmers in John Deere caps and blue jeans. None of the speakers were inarticulate or without emotion.

"I've been promised by the experts at Dominion Power that my land is a target for the 15-story power lines they propose to build," said Judy Almquist of Marshall, a retired widow who supports herself by renting out the six houses and apartments on her 50-acre farm in Fauquier County. "Two local realtors told me that my property is worthless right now because no one will buy it."

Almquist added that just the threat of the power line has prompted a farmer who keeps longhorn cattle on her place to let her know that if the power lines come, the cows go. Two of her six tenants have notified her that they won't stay and live underneath high-voltage power lines. Experts that Almquist has hired said the lines could reduce the market value of her farm by 75 percent.

"I've done my homework," she said to the three DOE officials sitting on a raised platform, who said little and showed no emotion during the six-hour hearing, "and I'm asking you to do whatever it takes to keep Dominion Power from being handed federal eminent domain, carte blanche, without due process."

John DePerro of Warrenton, representing the Vint Hill Homeowners Association told the DOE committee, "at no time, even after repeated written and 'in press' requests, has Dominion produced any study, of any description, that validates the company's claim that sufficient demand exists. "We respectfully ask the DOE to release for public review any such studies provided by the regional coordinating agency, Dominion, or any other downstream utilities that identifies the demand patterns compelling the creation of the NIETC," urged DePerro.

Seeking input

The public hearing was held by the DOE's Office of Electric Delivery and Energy Reliability to seek comment from the public on a Northeast "national interest" electric transmission corridor designation, covering a broad swath of millions of acres from New York state to Virginia, ending in the Piedmont. The corridor designation would allow the federal government to make decisions about power transmission through the area without state or local input.

Its draft National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor (NIETC) designation covers more than 200 counties on the East Coast, including 15 counties and seven cities in Virginia.

In a Power Point presentation to the 150 people gathered, the DOE's David Meyer explained that a "robust transmission grid" is the "superhighway" network needed to deliver "reliable, low-cost electricity to consumers. "It is vital to the nation's economic health and welfare," Meyer said. "We have seen persistent underinvestment in the transmission sector, relative to demand growth, since the mid-1980s."

The Energy Policy Act of 2005, Meyer explained, requires states to consider adopting policies directing utilities to strengthen their demand response programs; requires the DOE to set efficiency standards for a wider range of "consumer products;" requires FERC to provide financial incentives for new transmission investment; requires DOE to publish a national study every three years on transmission congestion, and authorizes DOE to designate appropriate areas as National Corridors if it finds that consumers are being adversely affected by transmission constraints or congestion.

The designation, he said, would "signify that the federal government has concluded that a transmission congestion problem exists in the area and requires a timely solution."

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Vocally opposed

Much of the crowd was hearing none of it, however, and spoke in vocal opposition to Dominion Power's April 19 filing of an application for a new power line across Virginia's Piedmont and parts of West Virginia. Dominion's submission of the southern "preferred route" as well as an alternate route directly along Interstate 66 within the VDOT right-of-way, would stretch through Frederick, Warren, Rappahannock, Culpeper, Fauquier, Prince William and Loudoun counties.

The proposed towers would stand up to 177 feet tall and require a 150-200 foot wide right-of-way. Representatives of Allegheny Power and PJM Interconnection are currently seeking federal eminent domain authority (through FERC) to string the line.

Julie Crenshaw Van Fleet of Alexandria said that for decades Americans saw electricity lines as a sign of the rush of the industrial age, but now, she said, she views the old 30-40 year-old power plants as relics of the past.

"These dirty fuel emissions accelerate global warming," she said. "We just want conservation of our resources."

Elizabeth O'Hara, the director of federal affairs for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said its 277,000 members strongly supported implementation of an Environmental Impact Statement. "We're deeply troubled by the substantial and long-term impacts these power lines would have on historic properties," she said. "These rules are draconian and enormously complex. Sixty days comment on them is insufficient."

Catherine Scott, the director of land conservation for the Piedmont Environmental Council and a Rappahannock landowner, said that the county has placed more than 270,000 acres under scenic easement. "This enhances clean air and clean water," she said. "This county has placed a high value on land conservation and we don't want to see that destroyed in an instant."

Caleb Jaffe, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center in Charlottesville, said that the DOE's action without an Environmental Impact Statement would set "a bad precedent for future actions." He said such decisions should lie with the states, in governmental bodies like the State Corporation Commission, not the Department of Energy or Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, known as "FERC."

"We are not here to debate the merits of the Energy Policy Act of 2005," the DOE's Meyer told the crowd. "We are not here to debate the merits of proposed transmission projects, or of non-transmission solutions to congestion problems "we wish to hear your views about whether designation of a National Corridor in this general area is appropriate, and if so, where its boundaries should be drawn."

Wayne Murphy, who represented the 1,600-member Piedmont Homeowners Association, said that his group feels that extra electrical capacity can be resolved through demand reduction schemes and alternative energy sources. "This does not solve our energy problems," he said. "It shuts out homeowners from their essential property rights, which is a fundamental right of the American soul, Murphy stated and then added, "Dominion and its shareholders do not have eminent domain over everything."

Jim Feeney of Haymarket, a self-described energy specialist who once worked at FERC, called the notion of the Piedmont as part of a transmission corridor "absurd."

"This is a super-transmission corridor, not a national interest transmission corridor," he said. "The designation of this area as a corridor would have the potential for major environmental impacts."

Les Armstrong of Fauquier County agreed. "This considers new construction as the only solution," he said. "We're creating a bigger national problem with global warming by building these new lines."

Politicians weigh in

Throughout the day, several politicians dropped in, including Rep. Tom Davis (R-11th) and Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10th). Davis told a reporter that more power was needed for an overloaded system, but remains skeptical about the corridor.

Wolf opposes the designation and wrote in a letter to DOE Secretary Samuel Bodman Tuesday that states and localities must have say in designating power line corridors. The letter, Wolf said, was signed by 40 other members of Congress, who like him, are requesting more public meetings on the matter.

"The states and localities impacted by these proposed designations need to have a say in the process," Wolf said. "We can't have huge transmission power lines cutting through existing neighborhoods or over huge swaths of open space, especially over historically significant land, and deny local communities the opportunity to weigh in."

Wolf also said he was disappointed that DOE did not take into account legislation he introduced along with Davis in February, aimed at providing guidance in developing the proposed national interest electric transmission corridors.

"The federal government should not just run roughshod over these communities. It's not right," Wolf added.

"While I fully recognize that our power supplies must be adequate and reliable, I am concerned that these 'national interest' designations will permit utility companies to continue to ignore the need for smart grid technology, superconductor wires and cleaner energy generation," Wolf said. "Again, I understand the need for reliable power, but all avenues must be explored as this process goes forward, and more than just what is best for a company's bottom line must be considered."

Michael Kaine of Leesburg, a Piedmont Environmental Council supporter, said he was very concerned about the rich, historical landscape that would be destroyed by the power lines. "Have you ever seen the breathtaking beauty of the Bull Run Mountains or the Appalachian Trail?" he asked the DOE officials. "It's a visual feast for the eyes." All of the pristine landscapes, the work of a generation of conservationists, would be destroyed in an instant," he lamented.

Mary Lou Hamilton of Culpeper agreed. "The very land at risk is the land that our forefathers fought for," she said. "It should not be destroyed because we're living with an outdated energy policy."

Rappahannock weighs in

Stephanie Ritter of Rappahannock said the lines carrying power from the "carbon-spewing power plants" would destroy "some of the most beautiful landscape in the country. Virginia should not be part of this corridor."

Philip Krastman, an engineer from Rappahannock County, called the high-voltage transmission lines "death traps for people who live near them." He said they weren't needed, as there are "low-voltage ways to provide power, such as wind and solar power."

Other speakers included representatives of the American Solar Society, the Sierra Club, the Piedmont Environmental Council and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Only the lobbyists for the energy interests spoke in favor of the corridors

Don Loock of Rappahannock County said the "fast-tracking of this process [through the DOE and FERC] would dismantle decades of protecting our national treasures. This is an unceremonious handling of eminent domain by FERC. All of these lands are at risk."

Arthur Gray Coyner, a retired farmer from Delaplane and a supporter of the PEC, said that the utilities are ignoring the Piedmont's "critical watersheds, historic battlefields, state parks, farmland and beautiful open space" to buffer their profits. "Such arrogance," he huffed.



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