



Power line opponents to have their say

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By Janice Crompton, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Washington and Greene county property owners who oppose plans for a high-voltage power line in their area will get their first chance this week to let the federal government know how they feel.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Energy has scheduled a hearing at the National Energy Technology Lab in South Park Township to gather input from residents and ratepayers affected by a plan to designate a large swath of the Northeastern United States as a national interest electric transmission corridor -- or NIETC.

At the same time, Congress may get its first peek at the controversial issue, while local property owners tonight begin strategizing with lawyers over property rights issues.

The NIETC designation is important to those property owners because of Allegheny Power's plan to construct a 37-mile, 500-kilovolt power line through Washington and Greene counties, to a power station to be built in Dunkard, Greene County.

When completed, the line would run for 240 miles, through West Virginia and Maryland, ending in Northern Virginia, an area which has been losing power plants. Allegheny Power officials say that the Pennsylvania portion would serve local residents only.

The DOE last summer conducted a study, determining that Northern Virginia and much of the Mid-Atlantic region were in "critical" need of new power sources. Plans were developed by local companies to supply it by transferring power from low-cost coal-generated plants in the Ohio Valley and Midwest to the Eastern United States.

Part of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 allows the DOE to designate critical areas as national interest corridors, and to seize private property if needed. Perhaps the most controversial provision locally is the federal government's right to override state permitting decisions for transmission lines.

If a state denies a permit, makes no decision on it within one year or places too many conditions on a power company permit, the federal government has backstop authority to grant construction permits, superseding state and local regulations.

While local communities have not yet begun their fight with the state Public Utility Commission -- that begins this summer with hearings before the PUC -- this will be residents' only opportunity to address the federal government over the NIETC and its effects on them. Public comment on the corridor will close July 6.

Last week, at a House Appropriations Committee hearing, two congressmen tried and failed by a 30-35 vote to strip funding for the NIETC program for one year. U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, who has voiced his opposition to the project along with most other elected officials, voted in favor of stripping the funding.

"I'm extremely disappointed that the vote failed," Mr. Murtha said in a statement Friday. "We will continue to work on this issue and force the power companies to work with the local officials to find a reasonable way to solve this problem."

This week, U.S. Reps. Maurice Hinchey, D-New York, and Frank Wolf, R-Virginia, plan to re-submit an amendment to an Energy and Water funding bill, this time before the full House. If passed, it would put the brakes on plans for the NIETC for at least a year.

"We're just asking people to take a deep breath here," said Robert Lazaro, director of communications for the Piedmont Environmental Council in Virginia.

"This is power companies having the right to condemn private property for profits," he said.

An extra year would provide time to consider how the plan would affect farming, historic landmarks, national parks and Civil War battlefields not currently protected under the NIETC proposal, which includes 50 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, 11 states and nearly 75 million people.

"It gives time for folks to sit down and see what this means," Mr. Lazaro said.

The issue over federal authority will be pointless, however, if the power company proposal is approved by the state, so local government officials and Stop the Towers, a local citizens group, will hold a workshop tonight from 5 to 9 at the Carmichaels Fire Hall in Greene County.

Former Washington County and state appellate Judge Richard DiSalle said he plans to attend. Judge DiSalle said he will bring along several associates to discuss possible legal action with property owners.

At issue are right of way easements purchased by Allegheny Power three decades ago in anticipation of a power line that would serve the booming steel industry.

When that didn't materialize, property owners thought the company had abandoned the rights of way. Because those deals sometimes didn't make it onto the rural deeds, some owners were recently surprised to learn they were sharing property with the power company.

Allegheny Power says the plan, called the Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line Project, or TrAIL, is necessary to address power shortages in the East, and to provide additional power to the developing areas of central and northern Washington County, which could begin to experience rolling blackouts and brownouts in a few years if nothing is done.

Company officials, including Allegheny Power President David Flitman, said power from this area won't be shipped east, but local officials and residents alike don't buy it. They say additional power isn't needed and cite concerns over health, property values and higher

rates. Local ratepayers will fund the cost of the new infrastructure.

State Sen. J. Barry Stout, D-Bentleyville, plans to testify before the DOE at Wednesday's hearing and said the federal government should not have the power of eminent domain over local property owners.

"That is something that should be used very cautiously," he said.

Mr. Stout said he's unconvinced that Washington County needs additional power and said local plants would be happy to ship coal to the East Coast for power needs.

"I am very suspect of that claim," he said.

Officials from the National Energy Technology Lab are preparing for a large turnout Wednesday and said there will be designated parking available, along with shuttles to escort visitors to the conference center where the hearing will be held from 1 to 7 p.m. Those interested in speaking should begin signing up at noon. All who sign up to speak will be given the opportunity to do so, but each must keep comments to less than two minutes.

Otis Mills, media relations manager at the site, said visitors should carry photo identification, but have no weapons, illegal drugs, or cameras, including cell phones with cameras.

For more information on busing to the site, or for more information about tonight's meeting, call the Greene County Department of Economic Development at 724-852-5300 or visit www.co.greene.pa.us.

For directions, to register to speak at the hearing or view a live Web cast, or to submit comments electronically, visit nietc.anl.gov.

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