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Confrontational First Meeting with EQT

EQT officials made the first local public presentation on their proposed gas transmission pipeline before a standing-room-only crowd in the Monroe County Courthouse, at a meeting hosted by the County Commission on Wednesday, November 12th. Company spokesmen said the 300 mile line will help address increased demand for natural gas in the southeast.

The proposed route traverses eleven counties in West Virginia and five in Virginia, before joining the Texas-to-New Jersey Transco line in south central Virginia. The line will most likely be 42 inches in diameter, and require three to four compressor stations along the route at locations as yet undetermined.

The company reports that the current route was brought forward on October 7th, and replaces two earlier tentative routes. The initial 300 foot wide study corridor will eventually be narrowed to a 125 ft. construction corridor, which narrows again to a 75 ft. permanent easement once the line is in place. A certificate of approval is required from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission or FERC before construction begins.

Pre-filing of the proposal was made on October 31st. The company projects that filing of the official application may be accomplished by October of next year, with possible FERC approval by October of 2016. A roughly two-year construction period would follow that, with tentative completion of the line projected sometime in the fall of 2018. Company representatives suggest that EQT community meetings may begin in Monroe County next month or the following; with FERC Scoping Meetings likely to occur in the Spring of 2015.

Representatives touted the economic benefits during the construction period to local restaurants and motels, and added that access to natural gas promotes economic growth. They also noted that in the absence of new pipelines, the only alternate means of transporting natural gas from the Marcellus Shale would be by rail or by truck.

Few of those in the crowd seemed particularly thrilled with the pending project, and several held up signs of protest. A period for questions and comments was allowed, following the company's presentation.

Laurie Ardisson, a local nurse concerned about health and safety issues after having visited gas drilling sites in Doddridge County, asked why investors are informed about the serious risks involved in pipelines whereas the people who live near them are told it is safe. She then read from the Precautionary Statement issued to investors to forewarn them that their returns on investment may be less than expected for several cited reasons. The representative answered that it would be disingenuous to say there has never been an incident with a natural gas pipeline, but pointed to the commentary from those who regulate this industry which states that it is very safe and pipelines are the safest way to transport natural gas. He added that this pipeline would be remotely monitored 24/7 by information technology systems located in Pittsburgh, PA.

Joel Shaffron, a resident of Rock Camp, asked if landowners could "opt out" of herbicide spraying during right-of-way maintenance and request only mechanical clearing. The company representatives responded that they did not know. Joe Chasnoff, of Zenith, noted that EQT is currently facing a fine as a result of an impoundment leak in Pennsylvania.

Bob Chamberlain, of Hans Creek, asked if a bond of a sufficient dollar amount would be posted to repair rural roadways damaged by heavy construction equipment. The company responded that the FERC permit might require such an action, in which case the company would comply.

Mr. Lilly, also from Hans Creek, asked how taxes would be assessed on the line. The company responded that EQT would be responsible for paying county tax on the pipeline as infrastructure on an annual basis, in an amount not yet determined; but that property owners would still be responsible for property tax on the portion of their land covered by the easement.

Tony Mietus asked why existing rights-of-way cannot be used, and how "necessity" for the line is determined. The company responded that they do look at "co-locating" lines whenever feasible, and that FERC will determine whether or not the pipeline is a necessity.

Richard Ettelson, of Waiteville, cited a news article reporting the record 4.5 million dollar DEP fine EQT is facing, along with three criminal and six misdemeanor charges filed by he Attorney General of Pennsylvania, for environmental damage caused by the company's fracking practices. He then asked why local residents should expect things would be any different here. This was met with a round of applause from the audience.

Dr. Steve Miller, of Peterstown, noted that he favors economic development and progressive thinking, but added that he believes the pipeline proposal represents neither of those things. He cited realtors who claim the project would severely impact property values, and added that in some high volume fracking counties in WV, banks have been left holding mortgages on properties that no longer have sufficient value. He also expressed his belief that the pipeline would create no lasting local jobs, and also referenced criminal charges in Pennsylvania regarding the company's fracking practices. Lastly he noted the projected pipeline's proximity to James Monroe High School and it's crossing of several significant water resources in the southern part of the county. His remarks were also met with applause from the audience.

Another speaker expressed concerns that the project could jeopardize drinking water supplies to 4,000 Red Sulphur PSD customers, and would likely provide no benefit other than to EQT profits. Someone stated that the local assessor's office had performed a tentative calculation of revenue, and that the county would receive only about $9,000 per year in infrastructure taxes; a figure which would then decrease over a period of thirty years.

Jane Kersey, of Peterstown, explained to the group that she has been dealing with the construction of a smaller Columbia Gas line on her property for the last many months, and read aloud a letter she had submitted to the company to express her frustration with the construction process. A list of complaints included blocked driveways, damaged driveways, suspected drug use on the worksite, and use of the entire worksite as a restroom. She concluded her remarks by noting, "Everything they said wouldn't happen did happen. The company is only interested in their own profits."

Howdy Henritz, of Hans Creek, asked if the company would pay for water testing of private wells and springs. Receiving no definite reply, he asked, "Can you fix my water supply if it's damaged by construction of this line?"

Dale McCutcheon commented that as a former county health officer, he was very familiar with roads, water, and environmental issues in the local area. He remarked to the company, "You have no idea of the potential for harm in this county." He expressed his belief that landowners will be affected economically, values will go down, and buyers will be reluctant to consider properties near the line.

Roseanna Sacco, of Sweet Springs, stated that Monroe County would like to contribute to diversifying West Virginia's energy portfolio by becoming a model for renewable energy, and asked if proposed pipeline partner company Next Era, which is North America's top provider of wind and solar power, could focus its efforts here on that goal instead. Kathy Mundell, of Greenville, made mention of the fact that the proposed pipeline will cross the St. Clair fault, and asked if the pipeline could resist damage from an earthquake. Company representatives responded that such concerns would be dealt with in the design study.

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