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Karst a ‘disaster’ for pipeline company, expert tells board

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Cave authority and Burnsville resident Phil Lucas told Highland supervisors the Atlantic Coast Pipeline would be a calamity if construction proceeds as proposed through the karst topography of Highland.

“If an engineering firm looked at this area they would be scared to death and look at another area,” Lucas said, in response to audience member Bill Ellenburg’s question about what impact the proposed pipeline might have.

“I think if they (Dominion) were to come through here, it would a disaster for the company,” Lucas said.

Lucas’ pipeline comments followed a slide presentation he made on behalf of the Butler Cave Conservation Society and the Virginia Speleological Survey to supervisors Dec. 16. Lucas said he expected someone would ask about the pipeline.

Supervisors made no comments about Lucas’ remarks concerning the proposed ACP, but Lucas received thanks from the board for donating two books about caves to the Highland County Library reference section: “Caves of the Burnsville Cove,” of which he is a contributing author, and “Breathing Cave Monograph,” which he wrote.

Burnsville Cove is about 10 miles south of McDowell and straddles the Bath-Highland line. The largest cave in the cove is 23 miles long, Lucas said. The cove includes two valleys with karst limestone.

“Karst is sinkholes, caves, sinking streams and outcrops all present in this part of the county,” he said. More than 90 caves have been discovered in the area, and sinkholes are estimated to number 1,500.

“We have surveyed more than 75 miles of cave passages in caves systems having one or more underground streams. One of the sinkholes is more than a mile long, and if blocked, would become a natural lake. That has occurred in the geologic past,” he said.

“Karst springs can gain velocity in a hurry,” he said. “It’s very fascinating to see the hydrology of the area.”

Lucas said tracing dye is used to determine where underground streams go. The karst area is recognized by the Virginia Cave Board and the Department of Parks and Recreation as significant because it is densely populated with passages. “I don’t think many people know that,” Lucas said.

He told the board that early pioneers used caves for shelter and mined nitrates to make gunpowder. Breathing Cave was mined from the late 1700s up to the Civil War, he said.

Butler Cave was discovered in the 1950s. The cave features a natural bridge, huge passages, and was surveyed as 17 miles long. Butler Cave was once recognized as Virginia’s largest cave.

“When you’re in a cave, you see things that you don’t see on the surface,” he said.

North of Bath County, caves are smaller and less numerous. “We don’t know why,” Lucas said.

He said the cove “is right here in this county, and it’s a pretty special place. I thought you should know about it.”

Lucas said a Bath County employee said they weren’t interested in a presentation to supervisors there. He and other cavers are routinely discovering new caves by digging, and he and fellow caver Mark Hodge of McDowell were planning on digging the next day.