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## Pipeline route opposition mounts

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — More concerns over the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline route through southern Highland and northern Bath counties continued to pour into federal records this week, not only from landowners, but from political and civic club leadership.

Sen. Creigh Deeds requested a scoping period for the newly impacted landowners in Bath County to evaluate fully the impacts on their property and community. “Since the announcement, I have received a number of emails and letters expressing a range of concerns about the potential impact of the pipeline on fragile ecological systems, the underground water supply, historical properties, and the vibrant tourism industry, to name a few. I hope FERC will provide an adequate scoping period for all those affected to review and respond to the notice,” Deeds said.

Del. Ben Cline said his first concern relates to the possibility of erosion and sediment pollution of several significant waterways in Bath County. Virginia “has an abundance of natural resources and waterways, and I do not want this area in Bath County to be harmed by the proposed new route, as this area is already vulnerable to water pollution from sinkholes and fracture systems. It is my hope that (FERC) will seriously study this before granting permission to construct a large pipeline in this area.

“Second,” Cline said, “the newly proposed route means that there are 249 additional landowners living in Augusta, Bath, and Highland counties, along with landowners in Randolph and Pocahontas counties in West Virginia, who will be affected. It is my understanding that around 80 of these will be in my district in Bath County. Since the announcement of the new route, I have received letters from several of my constituents who are concerned about the effect that this move could have on their land, including one constituent whose family farm has belonged to them since the Revolutionary War. I have asked Dominion to look at all alternative options as they continue to survey for their pipeline. It is my hope that these alternative routes would have little effect on private property by using rights of way and easements already in existence by power and telephone lines. I am writing to ask that FERC take this into consideration as the decision regarding this pipeline is made.”

Bolar Ruritan Club president Norm Bell told FERC the club is “solidly united in opposition to the Atlantic Coast Pipeline proposal. The latest pipeline route passes within 500 feet of our property. Our hall is a building widely used by the community for many events, such as children’s birthday parties, funeral meals, local bird club meetings and many other local meetings or events,” Bell wrote.

“The site shares one-half acre with the Bolar Volunteer Fire Department. Both entities are funded solely by fundraising events open to the public on those premises several times a year. Our funds are used entirely to

support those in our immediate community and neighborhood who are in need of support, like home repair, utility payments or fire and rescue equipment. Bolar Ruritan Club also provides seven full-time scholarships for young people who otherwise might not have the means to attend college.

“Our goal in the community is to better our community. We see no improvement to our community from the construction of this pipeline. On the contrary, we know that a pipeline construction of this magnitude and the subsequent maintenance practices in the right of way will forever damage the scenic mountains around us, the quality of surface waters, including trout streams, and the fragile karst geology that supplies our drinking water, springs and sinking creeks,” Bell said.

“The Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC has hurriedly proposed this pipeline to quickly move extracted, fracked natural gas from diminishing resources into the marketplace, where it may be exported to India and other countries. The limited liability corporation hopes to convert the damages to landowners, the environment, and the climate into huge profits. The small, rural communities along the route will be the ones left with any unmitigated damages, safety concerns and little or no economic benefits.

“Our club and our local economy greatly depend on tourism. Tourists don’t come to look at wide, defoliated, empty corridors marked with danger signs. They can probably find that closer to home. People come to enjoy our unspoiled environment, and pastoral scenery, they fish for trout in our high quality rivers, and they photograph/paint our high altitude plants, birds, animals and astonishingly scenic vistas. The economic benefit of our natural resources is being ignored. The ACP project directly threatens our ability to afford and continue our important community work. We strongly urge that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission deny the permit for this project,” Bell said.

Philip R. Hirsh, M.D., whose grandfather came to Bath County in the late 19th century and purchased property that includes colonial Fort Dinwiddie, said water from his spring supplied the fort and continues to be the source of drinking water. “George Washington drank the same water when he supervised the fort’s construction in 1755. The land is under protection by a Virginia Outdoors Foundation easement, whose purpose is to guard the land and its fragile ecosystem against all forms of degradation and exploitation. How ironic that a private company can marshal the resources and seek government sanction to override that mission, and literally devastate a currently pristine part of two states,” Hirsh said.

“The threat to our economy is also clear and cannot be dismissed as conjecture. The failure of any part of our spring and aquifer network spells doom for the rest. They are all connected. When I was I kid, my father (a hydraulic engineer) did an experiment to test the issue of ‘connectedness.’ During a dry spell, he poured several sacks of oats into a hole on the edge of a small creek on the northeast side of the farm. After rain filled the creek, the oats came out in the Jackson River on Fassifern Farm, below and several miles west of the creek,” Hirsh explained.

“Our entire economy is based on tourism, itself based on the purity of our waters and untrammelled mountain scenery. If anything were to happen to our water, it would take down the Homestead and everyone with it. The argument that the pipeline would be good for employment is misleading; again, the object of study showing only a tiny and transient benefit from both employment and numbers of sandwiches sold at local gas stations,” Hirsh said.

Scott Miller of Williamsville asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to schedule a scoping meeting for the new route. “Clearly, the scoping meetings and related EIS are critical to an informed decision by FERC. I strongly urge that you not circumvent the process for the applicant’s convenience and ensure that Dominion completes all required steps before proceeding with this project,” Miller said.

“Dominion has stated publicly that they wouldn’t want to build over a karst area,” said Nancy Miller of Williamsville. “It is impossible to accomplish this along the currently proposed route. Hold them to their word.”

She asked, “How will Dominion monitor the quality and yield of springs and wells? Will Dominion accept full responsibility for damage to water supplies? Dominion has stated that the pipeline will have no negative impact on my property value. Please explain how a pipeline that limits use of my property and interferes with my viewshed (tree removal) will not have a negative impact. Because of the karst topography in our area there is great concern about serious erosion during and following construction. Can Dominion guarantee this won’t happen? If this does happen, what will Dominion do to remedy the situation? Should a pipeline leak, what contaminants might leak into soil or nearby waterways? If well/spring owners want to obtain baseline data for their water, what tests should be used to provide appropriate data for later comparison?” she asked.

Bonnie Ralston of Deerfield Valley said noted underground water supplies are connected in ways that are not obvious when looking above ground. “Our property contains many springs, several ponds, a wetland, a creek, Hughart’s Run, and our well, which supplies two houses. With the way our water sources are spread out around our property, the route will not be able to avoid them. I am also concerned about how the pipeline will affect farming,” she wrote. “We have pastures and many water sources for cattle, along with hayfields. Heavy, large farm equipment is used on all areas of our property.

“The pipeline will be devastating for our way of life here,” Ralston said.

Bath resident Mary Hodges said the proposed path of the pipeline is just up the Jackson River from her farm. “Our historic 1700s farm place borders the George Washington National Forest and includes a mile of river frontage, caves, sink holes, karst topography, protected and endangered species. Like so many others in our area, we rely on our spring for our drinking water, for our livestock and a trout hatchery. This project will have immediate as well as long term devastating consequences for Bath County both from an environmental and economic point of view. The failure of any part of our spring and aquifer network will have a long ranging effect on neighboring properties throughout our county.”