

THE RECORDER, 12/04/14

## Money talks

Dominion's announcement this week that Highland could see an annual \$422,000 boost in tax revenue is well-timed, isn't it?

On the heels of publicity surrounding serious environmental damage at one of Dominion's other projects, the corporate powerhouse has released estimates touting how much money it will spend in three states for its proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Those figures are tough to ignore. For a county this size, it amounts to a 5 percent increase in the budget, peaking at something more than \$600,000 a year.

Could Highland use that kind of money? You bet. And Dominion didn't hesitate to call attention to school budgets or other county services that kind of money could buy.

Whenever a corporation virtually brags about how much it will pay in taxes, beware.

For Dominion, this is about public relations. It's about buying goodwill from the localities its pipeline will affect. It's about proving to federal regulators that its project will have a strong, economic benefit, which is what the feds consider.

To be sure, the projected estimates carry a lot of caveats. This money is based on current rates and ratios, any of which could change by the time this project is completed. We urge leaders in every locality to tread carefully as they weigh these estimates.

We aren't surprised that Highland supervisors take pause in considering what they could improve here with that level of extra income. Dominion has been a relative cash cow for neighboring Bath County for more than 25 years with its pumped storage station generating millions over that time. However, that project affected one place, and a handful of farms, back in the 1970s when it was first under construction.

This pipeline affects hundreds upon hundreds of people across three states.

Before Highland County starts drooling at the amount of money it could add to its coffers, let's take a deep breath and consider the consequences, again, of allowing heavy industry to gain a foothold in these mountains.

One need only look as far as our West Virginia neighbors, and southwest Virginia, to see how often industrial corporations run roughshod over regions in desperate need of money and jobs. Our coal-fired and fracked friends got added income, and some still have jobs. But what did they lose by exploiting their environments for the sake of an uncertain stream of revenue? Their mountains and streams were clear-cut and polluted; their health was put at grave risk; and they lost their community identities to become corporately owned.

This, we've said for decades, cannot be allowed to happen to Highland. Nor should it happen to Augusta, or Nelson, or other like-minded communities that make protecting their environment and quality of life a top

priority.

Let's be honest. It will be harder for Highland to resist the money than other localities. We remain at the bottom statewide in median income, sales tax revenue, and have the smallest budget. Simultaneously, we carry a heavier load than most localities to support our one school division.

But we are not desperate.

Consider how many organizations are working incredibly hard these days to turn Highland County into a place that can sustain itself without turning private properties into mudslides — the tourism council, The Highland Center, the Economic Development Authority, county supervisors, the state park committee, local businesses and civic groups. For the first time in years, there is more action toward improving our economy, not just pie-in-the-sky thoughts, but tangible movement. None of the ideas generated so far put our environment at risk, and all of them are focused on jobs — jobs Dominion will not provide here.

Are we ready to roll over, take Dominion's money, and let the company have its way with our landowners, water supplies, roads, and more?

No. We could have our economy turned around on our own terms by the time this pipeline gets built, and that's where we should stay focused.

What happened in West Virginia tells us all we need to know. Dominion's project there, cited with violations for years, should put serious doubt in the minds of proponents for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Despite all the regulations put in place to protect soil and water with such projects, the process still fails and regulatory compliance is still woefully inadequate.

Should this pipeline be approved, expect damage. Expect violations. Expect excuses and delays in compliance. It's part of the process, business as usual for pipeline construction, and it will happen.

Again we urge Highland leaders to get off their neutral seats and take proactive measures to protect this county. Don't let the dollar signs blind you. If we're going to see green, let it be the green of our back yards, meadows and forests.