

## THE RECORDER, 082114

### EDITORIAL

#### Precious territory

After hearing two outstanding presentations about Dominion's proposed gas pipeline this week, citizens are poised to have a much better picture about how the project could affect them.

And it's not a pretty picture.

At Tuesday's town hall meeting, hosted by Highlanders for Responsible Development, we learned just how disruptive the construction of the pipeline would be on our environment, our water, our roads, and our quality of life.

We learned that Dominion has never built a pipeline this size before, and certainly not in the kind of mountainous terrain over karst topography that exists in the Highlands.

That, however, won't be a sticking point.

Don't forget: this is the same utility company that managed to construct the world's largest pumped storage station in Bath County — tunneling huge diameters inside a mountain, in the middle of harsh and rugged landscape, over the course of decades. We don't doubt that if Dominion sets out to build this pipeline, it has the engineering wherewithal to complete it even here, where the valleys and ridges are steeply separated by thousands of feet.

But that station was a very, very different kind of project. It created hundreds and hundreds of high paying jobs, launching careers along the way. Since the station began operating in 1985, it has generated electric power for nearly 30 years, creating a source of power that "fills in" during peaks of high demand. It has generated millions in revenue for Bath County over that time. Today, after replacing some turbines a few years ago, the station operates effectively still, and could easily last another 30-40 years. And it provides local jobs — good ones.

From the 1970s until its completion, the station overcame numerous hurdles. Though the safety record was considered top-notch, workers were hurt, some were killed, in its construction. Farming families, homes, graves, and archaeological sites were displaced. Traffic on the roads was a nightmare for a long time. Crime was up, but so was local business. There were numerous layoffs, fits and starts. If a project like that were proposed again in this area, residents would likely be strongly opposed to it, but even then, citizens could see clear, tangible economic benefits.

This pipeline, however, is another story.

So far, those clear, tangible economic benefits are hard to see. We know our roads would get a little more crammed and damaged. We'd have more people in the area, and thus, as our sheriff said, an increase in crime and accidents accordingly. Local businesses could see a bump in sales, too, while workers are here. There would be an increase in tax revenue for the county, but we don't know how much. Certainly it would not be the millions over decades Bath County has enjoyed. We know landowners could see compensation for easements, but only in a one-time chunk. We also know a few local jobs could be created, but not by the hundreds, and not likely the kind that launch careers. There are no dollar figures to measure at this point.

What are we measuring against? Loss of peace and quiet? Loss of tourist visitors to the county and through the national forests? Loss of protected habitat and species? Degraded streams, wells and springs? Loss of property values?

A key point made this week by Southern Environmental Law Center staff attorney Greg Buppert was: the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will weigh the pipeline project in economic terms. The environmental impacts will be reviewed, but this is about money — whether the line will reduce consumer energy costs in the south Atlantic region (not here in Highland), and create a regional competitive atmosphere that could bring power prices down (elsewhere, not here in Highland).

So, how do we put a price tag on the quality of our environment and the quality of life here in the Alleghenies? You can't. It's impossible to measure not because it has no value but because it's priceless.

As the last remaining area on the East Coast that has not seen the kind of debilitating industrial development as many of our Appalachian neighbors, this area of Virginia and West Virginia has an immeasurable value. If it's destroyed by blasting, the gallons of water taken from these streams and the sediment added to them, fragmented wild habitat — there is no way to replace the loss. It will never be the same again. Ever. Sadly, it appears FERC doesn't see it that way. Neither does Dominion, which has repeatedly said it will put disturbed land back to the way it was after construction. Many believe that's impossible.

Without evidence this pipeline is worth ruining one of the last, best, most unindustrialized, undeveloped areas on the East Coast, it's not worth it. Move the pipeline route around this region. Look for a route that won't destroy a way of life that exists nowhere else. This area cannot tolerate such an upheaval. Neither can its rivers and streams. Nor its wildlife. Nor most of its landowners.

If residents of the Highlands want to continue protecting their own land, and the public lands at risk, they will have to make their case in solidarity. Fortunately, that solidarity is growing — with alliances, friends' groups, and more. Let's keep up the momentum, and have faith FERC — and Dominion decision-makers — can come to understand what they propose to put at such risk.

Can it be built? Yes. Should it be built here? No.