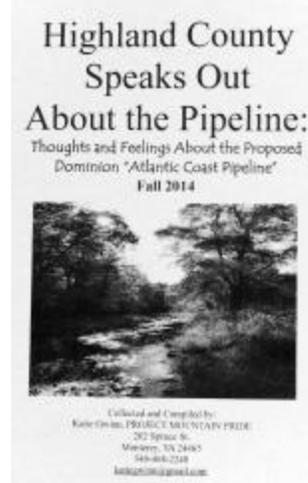


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## Survey says pipeline foes outnumber advocates 2-1

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



**A survey shows strong opposition to a proposed gas pipeline.**

MONTEREY — A town council meeting was where Katie Gwinn got the idea two months ago to canvas Highland about Dominion’s proposed gas pipeline that could cross the county if approved. She said the council discussion encouraged her to start reaching out to get Highland’s take on the pipeline proposal. Gwinn told council last Thursday, for that reason, it was only fitting she report about the recently completed survey.

The previous week, Gwinn received no comments after she reported to county supervisors about the survey and handed out copies of her 55-page book of findings, titled “Highland County Speaks Out About the Pipeline: Thoughts and Feelings About the Proposed Dominion Atlantic Coast Pipeline.”

By contrast, most town leaders were vocal in response to the survey.

Gwinn, who operates Trimble House Bed and Breakfast, explained how she went about polling for what she described as an independent, nonpartisan survey. Anonymity was granted to the respondents. Gwinn set up polling places and singlehandedly polled not only county residents but visitors as well.



**Mayor Rich Holman received a copy of the survey from Katie Gwinn. (Recorder photos by John Bruce)**

Overall, the findings show that pipeline opponents outnumber supporters by more than two to one. Out of a total of 462 responses:

- 20 percent were in favor;
- 48 percent were opposed;
- 15.5 percent were undecided; and
- 16.5 percent had no comment.

The survey yielded close to 400 sets of comments on diverse subjects. Of the many respondents who commented about local access to natural gas, one said, “As far as access to the pipeline’s gas, Dominion said at their initial public meeting in the courthouse that the highly pressurized pipeline could not be tapped and would shoot straight through the county. Lately they have from time to time indicated that maybe there could be some usage. Which is it? The flip-flop does not inspire trust.”

One respondent in the “big picture” category said opinions hinge on whether someone is a lifelong resident: “I grew up here ... I feel like people that are for the pipeline are native to Highland, but people that are against are folks that have moved to Highland in the last 20 years.”

The economic impact category revealed further discourse. As one respondent said, “I am concerned that the pipeline will devastate the economy of the county. The county’s economic base has been building on tourism, organic agriculture, and vacation homes. All will be adversely affected. The uncertainty surrounding this project can manifest in slowing sales and construction. How many people have delayed building or have looked and bought elsewhere? I hope the greed for additional tax revenue from the pipeline does not outweigh the future loss of tax revenue due to declining or stagnant land value. There are no real or long-lasting benefits to the county.”

Another respondent in the same category had a different opinion. “In my work, I’ve been involved with this since they started. One thing, I’ve been here for twenty-five plus years trying to help the community grow and I’m a full-time employee in the county. My views on this are that we need this for the potential for growth. Our schools are hanging in by a thread because of no population, only 15 grads this year. When I moved here

there were 30-some grads. You have to have work to sustain a population and this pipeline represents the potential for that. I watch people move away and watch the guys I work with have to drive an hour away to get work and most people that are against the pipeline aren't working day to day here. People are coming out of the woodwork on this, sitting in their log cabins watching the pretty view. They've got their farms and their money and they're fighting against everything that wants to come through, but they're not fighting for opportunity for growth and prosperity here. They defeated the retirement home, a skiing resort, a prison, a \$6 million improvement to the 250 highway at Bull Pasture and the pump station."

Concerns such as this one were expressed over safety: "Much discussion has already gone on about the wear and tear on county roads and the stress on our emergency services. Our county attorney and commissioners, among others, have brought this issue up, with little assurance from Dominion beyond saying that the company has its own emergency services. All well and good for accidents on the job, what about a catastrophic explosion? What about increased accidents to locals resulting from increased road traffic and poor road conditions?"

Divergent views were expressed concerning energy independence. One said, "Build a plant to produce electricity in West Virginia where they get the gas. I would very much rather see a line with electricity running through it underground. It would destroy a lot less of the scenic view."

Another respondent felt "fracking has made natural gas so cheap that the price has fallen from \$11/gallon to \$4/gallon. So, Dominion wants to get the price back up by shipping it to Europe and the Ukraine. This will not only mean good money for exporting but will also drive the price up for natural gas and gas-powered electricity for us here in America. So the savings on cheaper fracked gas won't be passed on to us. So much for fuel self-sufficiency. Instead of passing on cheaper prices to us from fracking, Dominion can make more money selling it overseas."

The environmental category of the survey contains differing comments. For instance, one respondent said, "The thing that sets the Dominion ACP proposal apart from all the other pipeline proposals is the intrusion on our national forest and the impact on the Allegheny Highlands, which has the highest ecological integrity among the remaining wild landscapes in the Eastern United States."

On the other hand, another commenter held that, "A majority of the arguments expressed by the opponents of the pipeline are laughable. In Highland County, karst geology exists on the proposed route for probably less than 5 percent. The area of USFS impacted is not a pristine undeveloped area, rather there are numerous existing roads that have accessed dozens of clearcut timber harvests over decades. Because of efforts by groups that are leading the opposition to the pipeline to also stop timber harvesting on the USFS, the forest is over mature and many species of wildlife which benefit from early successional forest types and/or forest openings, are in decline. The pipeline corridor will provide a permanent grassy strip which will provide a much needed habitat component for a wide variety of birds and animals."

And likewise, landowners expressed contrasting opinions. One was, "If what I'm seeing is correct, it will only leave a 75-foot permanent easement for maintenance. I can't understand why everyone's against it. I'm a landowner in Highland County. I own 600+ acres, and a hunting camp. I hope they go through my property. I'd love to get some revenue off it."

Another landowner said, "The rural community of Highland is small in population, it is rich in natural beauty and contains the headwaters for two of Virginia's rivers, the James and the Potomac, which flow north and

south from our farm. One of my biggest concerns is what this project will do to our local water supply and to the watershed for these rivers which supply water to much of Virginia. The topography in our valley, when disturbed, could result in reduced water quality and volume from existing wells, which would require the costly drilling of replacement wells. In addition, multiple springs on the farm will likely experience damage from construction silt run-off. Dominion says they will work with landowners to avoid such damage, but once the water is gone or contaminated, it will likely be beyond their capability to ameliorate.”

“I was really pleased with the response,” Gwinn told the council.

She said whether for or against, it was clear respondents shared a love of Highland County. “The goal was not to create a civil war but a sense of cooperation,” she said.

Mayor Rich Holman commended Gwinn “for a great job on this. That’s a lot of work, and anybody can see that.”

Gwinn said if it weren’t for the town council meeting she attended in September, there would not have been a survey.

Holman said he was “absolutely opposed” to the pipeline. He said he has personal reasons and as an elected official. He said he would be happy to debate those at any time. “I think it would be one of the worst things that could ever happen to this county,” Holman said.

Gwinn said two things that stood out in the poll were that people want jobs, and they want to protect the environment.

Holman said he has not been able to get an answer from Dominion about Monterey’s water supply.

“We have 500-600 people who depend on our water supply,” Holman said. If Dominion cannot say if it has figured out the answer, then, “There’s no way I can be in favor of it,” Holman said.

Council member Jack Kilgallen asked how the pipeline could affect water supply. Holman said a problem could arise if the aquifer supplying the wells were damaged when a spring was cut during construction.

Kilgallen said he was not adamantly opposed to the pipeline and he was not for it, either.

Council member Cody Cohen said she was concerned that Holman asked two people from Dominion twice about the municipal water question and did not get an answer. “That raises a flag to me,” she said.

For information about Gwinn’s survey or to get a copy of the results, call (540) 468-2248 or email [katiegwinn@gmail.com](mailto:katiegwinn@gmail.com).