

THE RECORDER, June 5, 2014

Here we go again

For years, the county was subjected to the idea of an industrial wind turbine project atop Allegheny Mountain, in the Laurel Fork watershed — one of the most pristine, ecologically sensitive areas in the world. After endless debate and controversy, Highland New Wind Development's wind plans seem to have petered out, likely due to lack of investors and strong opposition. We can't say the project has been abandoned altogether, but no construction has taken place since some initial grading and road building two years ago.

Now, the county has learned about Dominion Resources' plans for a natural gas pipeline traversing some 20 miles across from the upper western border to its border with Augusta County.

Opposition to the project is already mounting, primarily because initial maps of the proposed route enter at Allegheny Mountain, where the Laurel Fork watershed serves as habitat for multiple threatened and endangered species of plants and animals.

It's a special place. So special, in fact, that most of the private landowners have taken extraordinary steps to protect it from development. The Goodall family, in particular, has preserved nearly 1,700 acres under a strict conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy. As you can tell from McChesney Goodall's letter in today's Recorder, the family has already put Dominion on alert they will not even allow surveyors on the land they hope to preserve for generations to come.

If this pipeline is to come through Highland, it must be re-routed to avoid the Laurel Fork area. What about other special places along the way? Would it be a detriment to the historic Dividing Waters Farm in Hightown? George Washington National Forest land? The McDowell Battlefield? The breastworks atop Shenandoah Mountain?

The reality is: We don't know.

Dominion has repeatedly explained it's far too early to say where the pipeline would go, and it needs to complete surveying before it can make a determination on a specific route. We get that.

But what troubles us, and county officials, is the way Dominion has handled this so far. For a company investing \$4 billion in a three-state project, it evidently didn't budget much money for a solid rollout, complete with community engagement, good public relations and clear information from the outset.

Instead, the county received one rough map of the proposed three-state route that is too vague to be useful.

Dominion has repeatedly told The Recorder it cannot provide a better map until it has survey results. Yet, it did provide better maps to the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. It also provided somewhat better maps to Virginia's Department of Conservation and Recreation.

We find it hard to believe this giant public utility can't give our county more details, especially when those details have been compiled and sent elsewhere.

To their credit, Highland supervisors will insist more information be made available as soon as possible and are not rushing to judgment.

The rest of us should do that, too. There are too many unanswered questions about this to grasp all the complexities. Plus, Dominion might find out pretty quickly that bringing a pipeline through these mountains, through an unindustrialized and very rural county with multiple historic resources and protected areas, simply isn't worth the money or the public relations headache. After all, citizens here have been through this before, and they understand how this process works.

We understand that natural gas pipelines safely carry energy across the U.S. We also understand they come with hazards, and construction processes that can do permanent damage to protected areas and streams.

It's our job to learn more, to educate ourselves on all the impacts — including the safety measures required by our local volunteers to handle emergencies related to pipelines.

Until Dominion arrives to explain more about it — and we hope the company does that as soon as possible — we'll have to keep doing our homework.

Above all, let's not allow the proposal to divide our community. It's time we stick together, learn the facts, and address this issue with level heads.

Meanwhile, we encourage Dominion Resources to try a little harder with transparency. Dominion should understand one thing: Those who love Highland County should never be underestimated — they are remarkably dedicated to protecting this extraordinary place and its quality of life. Highlanders are unequalled in that regard.