

[http://www.therecorderonline.com/news/2015-01-29/Opinions %28and%29 Commentary/New hope from our lawmakers.html](http://www.therecorderonline.com/news/2015-01-29/Opinions%28and%29Commentary/New%20hope%20from%20our%20lawmakers.html)

THE RECORDER, Editorial, 012915

New hope from our lawmakers

Everyone complains about campaign financing.

Our lawmakers get thousands and thousands of dollars from industries, and most of us believe that kind of money sways our elected officials' votes and proposals.

Allow us to mention three gutsy Virginia lawmakers whose recent efforts to change laws on behalf of residents in this area set that notion squarely on its head.

Del. Richard "Dickie" Bell, Sen. Emmett Hanger, and Sen. Creigh Deeds — each, and together, have proposed measures that would protect landowners facing down Dominion's Atlantic Coast Pipeline project.

Dozens of landowners in Nelson, Augusta, and Highland counties have already been sued by Dominion for not allowing access to their property for surveying.

Dominion hasn't begun to use its authority to take property for its pipeline through eminent domain, but that will happen down the road.

In the middle of the pipeline controversy, Bell, Hanger, and Deeds are promoting bills in this General Assembly session that, if passed, would help landowners combat the utility's plans and make Dominion's process more transparent. They include:

- HB 1696, introduced by Bell — It would change the law to make any utility company's eminent domain procedures subject to the transparency provided by the Freedom of Information Act. Bell's logic is well-reasoned: If we allow companies to take private property, they should be forced to disclose the records in that process just like the government, which also has the power of eminent domain.
- SB 1166, introduced by Hanger, duplicates Bell's House measure, above.
- SB 1338, introduced by Hanger and co-patroned by Deeds — This bill would repeal the 2004 provision that allows interstate natural gas companies to enter properties for surveying without written consent of the owner. (By the way, Deeds was one of only a handful who did not vote for this bill back in 2004).
- SB 1169, introduced by Hanger — This bill would make a natural gas utility's authority to enter landowner property without permission conditioned upon a local government's support of the gas line through resolution. Of course, if SB 1338 passes repealing the law, this measure won't be necessary.
- SB 1435, introduced by Deeds — This would require all liability for lost profits claimed under an eminent domain proceeding to be set forth specifically in the award for just compensation.

Each of these measures, if passed, would be a burden on Dominion. Yet, Dominion has given thousands of dollars to these three legislators over the years. A quick check of the numbers at the Virginia Public Access Project (www.vpap.org):

- Electric utilities have given Bell \$14,600 — \$8,750 of that was from Dominion, one of his largest donors. In addition, Bell received another \$4,850 from natural gas companies.
- The electric industry has given Deeds \$140,875 — most of that, more than \$108,000, came from Dominion. In addition, Deeds received another \$38,600 from the natural gas industry.

- Hanger has gotten \$27,500 from electric utilities; \$17,500 of that was from Dominion. He, too, has received an additional \$9,100 from the natural gas industry.

All told, \$235,525 from the electric and natural gas sectors, with most of it — 57 percent — coming directly from Dominion (\$134,250). That's hardly chump change.

Dominion is well known for its generous contributions, but in this case, those donations do not seem to have protected Dominion's interests. If money buys influence, it has failed to do that with Bell, Hanger and Deeds.

What's unfortunate, however, is that these measures are unlikely to pass because Dominion, and similar corporations, have contributed to the rest of the General Assembly members, too, and in some cases, much, much more.

Dominion and Dominion Resources, in 2014-15, are the fifth highest donors, giving more than \$1.5 million to members of the General Assembly. Over the last 10 years, according to VPAP, donations from Dominion have been in the neighborhood of \$9.2 million.

That money does buy influence. Witness Sen. Frank Wagner of Virginia Beach: Electric utilities gave him \$58,870 over the years. Guess who gave the most? Dominion, of course — \$43,100. And guess who introduced a bill to help Dominion avoid State Corporation Commission oversight for the next eight years? Wagner's SB 1439 would bar the SCC from conducting biennial reviews of the rates and conditions for "any service of Dominion Virginia Power for the eight test periods beginning Jan. 1, 2013 and ending Dec. 31, 2020."

Let's think about this: Virginia's SCC decides what Dominion and other public utilities can charge us for the power we use. What Dominion customers pay goes into the corporate coffers, and some of that money (a lot of it, apparently) is used to lobby the General Assembly members and its committees.

Our lawmakers get hefty contributions, and some of them, like Wagner, are at the ready to create laws that help utilities like Dominion get a better deal in how they operate.

Non-profit organizations are limited in how much money they can spend on lobbying efforts, yet for-profit utilities (with very big profits), can throw money around like a dog shaking off mud. Fundamentally, if you're a Dominion customer, your own money is being used against you — to manipulate and influence public opinion, the laws governing these utilities, and your rights.

This is abhorrent and insidious.

We'd like to see a law restricting utilities' spending on political representatives and committees. Maybe in Bell, Deeds, and Hanger, we have leaders willing to try to unbuckle Dominion's power and influence from our General Assembly members.

Given Dominion's already powerful reach, we won't hold our breath. But we strongly urge our readers to support the bills on the table right now. We are being well represented, but our lawmakers need us to stay heavily engaged if they're going to win over their peers in the General Assembly.