

Trust already gone missing

As evidenced by its representatives Tuesday, Dominion Resources is nothing if not confident in its ability to build the proposed 550-mile gas pipeline across three states.

We heard from those involved with permitting for the project, environmental protection, construction and operation and to a one, they asserted confidence in their own skills and those of their teams.

These folks seemed knowledgeable, answering every question fired at them by landowners, residents and county officials as best they could.

As we followed up with those attending the open house, many told us that they weren't necessarily satisfied with what they heard from Dominion. Many remained skeptical. They were daunted by the scope of the massive construction that could take place on their own land and across their neighbors' tracts. Some were not confident this project would be good for Highland, and perhaps were overwhelmed by sheer volume of information to absorb and consider.

Confidence is related to trust — having the feeling one can rely on something or someone in firm trust. And trust is what's missing here.

Dominion is an enormous utility that answers to its investors first, regulators second and everyone else in order of appearance. It is a corporate entity given powers by our government that few private companies are granted, including the legal authority to take land through eminent domain. Its size alone makes it hard to trust it will do the right thing. Its financial resources make it a Goliath to every David who owns property along its proposed pipeline route.

How, then, can such a behemoth earn the trust of private individuals, families who face losing a lifetime of memories on their properties where they've built memories, worked for decades to manage and improve their land, and are deeply worried about how that land will be torn up to make way for this pipeline?

We've heard from folks who've had terrible experiences with some of Dominion's much smaller pipelines across their properties. We were told Dominion had nothing new to report on the status of its bid, and only days later the governor announces Dominion landed the job. Landowners are told on the one hand they have the right to refuse surveying, but on the other hand told Dominion must survey in order to know what to avoid. Meetings have been scheduled, then canceled or moved. Trust, in many ways, is already elusive where this project is concerned.

Augusta responded to the trust concern by demanding Dominion go through its county rezoning process before federal regulators take up the proposal. We understand it's early in this process and some questions cannot yet be answered. We also understand that federal regulators can override local law, but there is still time and legal authority to make a difference by following Augusta's lead and Highland supervisors should take up that discussion immediately.

We are also asked to trust in the process — that every agency examining this project will do its due diligence; that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will ask the right questions, properly address each concern, and make Dominion adjust as necessarily to avoid damage; that every construction worker will do his or her job properly and each inspector will be vigilant.

Given the overarching politicized debate that surrounds this, and any other large industry or project, trust is not going to happen. Dominion will be confident in its own abilities, but it should not expect the individuals affected will trust the company to have their best interests at heart. Inspectors and agencies reviewing the project will be confident in their abilities to oversee the project, but individuals affected will not put much faith in them, either. They've already seen too many times when these agencies fail. As one county supervisor said this week, Highlanders should remain skeptical and vigilant enough to document their own concerns and register them with FERC when the time comes.

And as we've said before, and Dominion echoed this week, landowners are critical to this process. They must tell contractors and surveyors where their springs and wells are located, where family burial plots are, where the sinkholes have been found, and what features of their properties are important to avoid. During construction, landowners must also keep an eye out for problems like erosion, polluted water, or other damage and alert contractors on the ground when issues arise.

Here's one area we'd like to think trust will play a strong role: Highland County residents should be able to trust one another. We urge the affected landowners to make their concerns and property issues known to Dominion, whether they allow surveyors on their land or not. As we well know, a polluted spring, sinkhole or karst feature on one tract of land can easily affect a neighbor's land. We need to trust our neighbors to make sure they protect the geology where the pipeline route will be located, and feel confident they will alert others if something goes wrong.

We'd like to think we can trust our county leaders during this process, too. Just because they're striving to remain neutral doesn't mean they aren't going to protect us, and advocate strongly on our behalf. We were very pleased with the good questions they posed this week, and we have faith they'll work hard toward protecting this county over the coming years, as they were elected to do.

We can also trust our law enforcement officials and emergency services workers to stay involved; they, too, asked relevant questions this week.

No, we shouldn't simply trust this process, or the contractors, or the inspectors. But we can trust one another. We know Highland better than any state or federal agency, we know this county better than Dominion, and we know each other very, very well.

There is little to be gained by allowing this project to divide us as a community. Let's respect each other's opinion. Debate the merits of this project, by all means, but don't let a passionate position or misinformation interfere with maintaining our county's integrity.

Those who left the open house Tuesday with further questions or concerns, or didn't have the chance to attend, should know that Dominion would like to hear from you. Information on how to contact Dominion is available on its website for the pipeline project. Please get in touch with them, and stay in touch with county leaders who can help.

This proposal has already created stress and anxiety, and that will get worse. But this is an independent and resourceful population of people who care deeply about Highland. We need to stick together, folks. We've got a long way to go.