



Senator Creigh Deeds Hears From Highland Officials Concerning Pipeline Oversight

Scott Smith, 12/21/15

One of the dominant stories over the past year and a half has been the announcement of the intent by Dominion Power and its partners to build the Atlantic Coast Pipeline through the Allegheny Highlands to transport natural gas. During his recent visit to Highland, Senator Creigh Deeds heard concerns from several local authorities regarding the project. While the Highland Board of Supervisors has taken a neutral stance, they made it clear that they the county lacked personnel and funding to provide environmental oversight, and that Dominion was providing little in the way of assurances should the construction destroy private or public water sources. The overwhelming consensus was that conditions be placed on the contractors to be responsible in these areas.

Planning commission member Bill Rich:

“It seems to me what we’re asking here is for a monitoring system to be set in place, and it would come out of Dominion’s budget. We’re not asking for your budget, but we’re asking for your support to go after Dominion, so that we have a baseline and we can continue to monitor as it goes along. As Melissa said, suppose your spring goes dry, there is no bonding, and how do they make good? They say they’ll make good, but that’s just words. So I think the thing that we’re asking for is that you folks make it clear to Dominion that we need some controls in place, and we need it to come from them, and they need to be an independent source, not the fox in the henhouse.”

The Senator felt that he believed the pipeline project would be approved, but he did not know if the legislature could require such oversight, to which county attorney Melissa Dowd replied,

“If the Commonwealth would take a stand with FERC, and say, in our communities, the only intelligent way for this pipeline to be developed, in terms of protecting public health and safety, is if FERC requires the Commonwealth to do “xyz”, or makes the requirement in the permit. So if the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission would say, “Dominion, you’re going to have to foot the bill for additional staff for the Commonwealth’s E&S program, to do water monitoring.” That’s where you

could help, and that's where the legislature could help, and it's not asking for money from the legislature. It's saying the legislature tell FERC Dominion's got to pay for this."

The Senator agreed to consider the options.

Senator Deeds has also been a champion of the idea of a state park located in Highland, and he reported he felt the prospects were favorable, especially with the Governors' proposed bond issue. Outgoing Supervisor Lee Blagg, playing the role of devil's advocate, wondered if the lost revenue from property taxes for the park would be made up in other ways.

"The state park, I think, is one of those things that can hopefully generate some business, and generate some ideas, and generate some population. But is it going to happen? I don't know. Nobody knows, but I know this – if we don't try something, we accomplish nothing. I think the state park is an idea that at least gives us a possibility and some hope for the future."

The Senator also heard concerns during the meeting on unfunded mandates, such as the need to purchase new voting machines, and unfilled judgeship positions. Board Chair David Blanchard summed up the message to take back to Richmond.

"But to recap – no unfunded mandates, and pipeline oversight.