

The Recorder

IN THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, SINCE 1877.

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Highland board needs resolve

We can't figure out whether to admire Highland supervisors' stubborn insistence on remaining "neutral" about the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Many county residents support the project, with good reason. Many property owners along the previous route, which roughly cut straight through the middle from border to border, saw opportunities, for themselves and the county.

In a place where median income levels are well below the state average, the prospect of getting big chunks of cash, and perhaps improvements to their land, provided hope. Affected landowners were promised money from Dominion for sacrificing acres where the pipeline would run. They felt poised to negotiate other mitigation items like fencing, bridges, road improvements, and timber sales from the forested areas that would be cleared. Most had done their homework, prepared to accommodate the line.

For farmers barely making ends meet, with no desire to sell their land, Dominion's offers are nearly irresistible, particularly if they support the company's claim about providing much needed domestic energy.

Supervisors understand this. Our elected leaders also understand the needed to fairly represent all constituents.

Furthermore, the pipeline, if built, would steer much-needed dollars to county coffers. Put yourself in our supervisors' shoes: They face raising taxes next fiscal year and the following, to make up some \$300,000 in budget deficits, and they know large landholders, particularly in the agricultural sectors, already struggle with local tax bills. Tax increases hurt. If you're not a farmer, you might not sufficiently understand this tax burden.

If the county receives thousands of dollars in revenue from the pipeline project, supervisors don't have to raise taxes, and there would be some form of industrial tax base, the argument goes.

In terms of representing those who are fiercely opposed to the pipeline and its potentially vast damage to water supplies and our sensitive topography and ecology, supervisors have gone on record with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission stating these concerns in great detail. Not that FERC or Dominion responded with anything useful, mind you, but our board did that. It also supported efforts through the Economic Development Authority to help affected landowners understand their rights, and gain access to resources for negotiating with Dominion before their land is taken.

What the board hasn't done is pass a resolution firmly opposed to the project; instead, supervisors say they welcome the tax revenue. That irritates those who feel the county isn't willing to staunchly defend residents against a monstrous and irresponsible land grab. Many of our neighbors' county governments have done that; Bath County, as of this week, is prepared to take an opposing stand by resolution, too (bravo!).

The Highland board's position of neutrality, as they see it, is critical to fair representation. Even supervisor David Blanchard has not strayed from this stance — despite the fact that the newly proposed pipeline route would cross his own family's historic land, and be within sight of his front porch. How does he manage to stay neutral?

As he told us this week, his family respects his position and he respects theirs. He's willing to help them find resources, and that's true for any other constituent. "I'm really trying to be as impartial as I can," he said. "I definitely never thought it would happen. Of all the land in the world, they found my little corner to cross ... but this is always a struggle for a person in a political leadership position. I would love to say, 'I don't want to see it here.' It's a personal feeling of mine. But when you are in a position of supervisor, you think, 'I don't want it on me, but I don't want it on you, either.' ... I don't want it to ruin anything for anybody."

But Blanchard recognizes how many residents have invested time and energy, whether they are fighting the project, or figuring out how to best accommodate it. For some, he notes, "They could set their farm up well into the future. They're investing into working that out then, all of a sudden, they move the line and upset a whole other group of people. Whether it's my family or someone else's family, Dominion should have figured all this out before they started bothering everybody ... People are upset, and looking for a place to place blame. The blame," he said, "is with Dominion."

This, we argue, is where Highland County's board has a position to take. Without opposing the project in general terms, or disrespecting constituents who support it, supervisors have several things to oppose here, on behalf of everyone they represent, including:

- Dominion's lack of responsiveness to county residents and landowners — The company is dismissive of our need for more detailed information. It hires surveyors and land negotiators who are out to get the best deal for Dominion, with little regard for our residents who cannot afford a high-powered attorney to represent their interests.
- Dominion's process — Dominion's open houses, while perhaps useful in some ways, gave residents conflicting answers from their experts and engineers on everything from how to drill

under streams to whether tractors can drive over buried pipe. There were no forums in which everyone could ask questions and hear the same answers.

- FERC's process — Highland didn't even get a nearby scoping meeting, as other localities did. Bath residents have for weeks urged FERC to hold one for the landowners along the newly proposed route. We're not holding our breath.
- The lack of a regional assessment — Highland's board should certainly be opposed to FERC's cowardly refusal to consider the ACP in conjunction with all the other pipelines proposed for the region.
- The urgency — The board should also strongly disapprove of Dominion's pressure on FERC to speed things along without all the information needed for a thorough environmental impact statement. County residents deserve time to make decisions for themselves; and supervisors deserve to have all the details in order to support residents.
- Virginia's lack of involvement — The board has more than enough reason to oppose the way Virginia's political system offsets proper environmental review, or provides none at all. Our Department of Environmental Quality has yet to unequivocally state it will have its inspectors on-site during construction, and watch the build-out along every stream and ridge to make sure our waters aren't muddied or drained completely.

If they want to protect residents, and we believe they do, that is the position supervisors should take — one of protection. They have the authority to oppose a lot of the issues surrounding this project, and they can do that without alienating those who support it.

It's time for our board to pass a resolution addressing these topics — individual voices from residents do not carry nearly the same weight with FERC as an official county position. Now is not the time to sit back and say, "We've kept quiet" about the pipeline, as one supervisor did this week.

Please, do not keep quiet. We need resolve, not silent resignation.