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Superhighway: A done deal?

Amid glad-handing and inferred pats on the back, we learned this week that Duke Energy, the nation's largest utility holding company, has given Dominion the nod to build its proposed interstate natural gas pipeline, a veritable north-south "superhighway" for gaseous gold.

Gov. Terry McAuliffe could not have been more enthusiastic in making the announcement, and said he was quite proud to have helped seal this deal.

He called the project a "game changer."

You bet it is.

If Virginia's governor wholly supports this project — before it's been vetted by federal regulators and before a final route has been determined — that changes the game, indeed.

Dominion has not even pre-filed for a permit to build the line, and our governor is already seeing dollar signs for Virginia, one of several states where good ol' boy politics and cronyism have sadly survived well beyond their heyday.

McAuliffe was ecstatic to announce how he would put all the resources of his office behind attracting new manufacturing companies from all over the world. He was downright delighted to talk about the money and jobs the pipeline could bring to Virginia.

But it's what McAuliffe failed to say that has us worried.

He didn't mention the serious impacts to Highland, with some of Virginia's most protected and undeveloped wild areas, nor national forestland, the Appalachian Trail, or the Laurel Fork watershed.

He didn't mention the thousands of private landowners who are deeply concerned about the value of their property declining.

He didn't say a word about how many rivers and karst features would be dug up, scraped over and blasted.

He didn't explain what his office would do to beef up environmental agencies that will be charged with reviewing erosion and stormwater runoff during construction.

We didn't hear any concerns about fragmented habitat, or protected wildlife.

Perhaps in his comfortable, private conversations with Dominion CEO Tom Farrell, he felt assured that Dominion would be responsible about such matters. Deep pockets have deep influences. That's business as usual in the Old Dominion. As for environmental safeguards, maybe Dominion will do right, and maybe it won't.

"I look forward to working with stakeholders to making this the safest, most environmentally responsible and locally cooperative pipeline ever built in the history of the United States of America," McAuliffe said. That's a tall order, Governor. Especially when residents of at least three counties are so strongly opposed to its proposed route where it enters Virginia. These folks are a long way from "cooperative," right now. How will you convince them that destroying the integrity of the Allegheny Highlands is for the greater good of our urban neighbors and two other states?

Running spurs off the line to manufacturers is the promise. Does anyone really believe new manufacturing companies will flock to Highland once the pipeline is here, especially when it has been clearly stated that its gas will *not* be made available in these parts?

Highland is one of the localities that will be the most severely impacted by this construction, and the least likely to benefit. No amount of tax revenue is worth disturbing such a large area of land and creating multiple and ongoing problems for our water and our environment.

Dominion now has three other power company partners to share the cost and revenue of the line. We bet all three were in competition with Dominion from the outset, but now they can spread the risk. They must believe enough customers exist to buy the gas Dominion will move from West Virginia to North Carolina, and they must see this as a hearty investment that will pay off big-time.

Maybe so. But they will do that on the backs of people whose lives will be upended for decades. A governor who complimented Highland on his campaign trail as Virginia's most scenic place now doesn't seem to care about our people enough to mention the sacrifices they will be forced to make.

We say to them: Don't give up.

Citizens who will be directly or indirectly impacted should not abandon their rightful duties to make sure the line doesn't damage their water, their environment, or their quality of life. Do not wait until later in this process to tell Dominion, and those influenced by Dominion, what you stand to lose.

Before he gets more carried away with this golden goose, this "superhighway," this "gamechanger" for the commonwealth, McAuliffe should take a closer look at where Dominion might build this line, and urge the power players to seek alternatives that will not destroy one of the last, best places on the East Coast.