



Dominion Transmission Line #65 Rappahannock River Crossing at the Norris Bridge

Existing Lines

The existing crossing of Line #65 at the Norris Bridge has small (80 feet) wooden towers carrying the line from the shore to the bridge, four located on the Lancaster side and three on the Middlesex side. The power line is then suspended by unobtrusive metal frames connected to the east side of the bridge. The existing towers are prominent only for the first few seconds of driving across the bridge. For the vast majority of the bridge, the view of the river is expansive and unobstructed. As you exit the bridge the wooden towers on the far side blend into the existing tree line.

Dominion's Towers Application

Following a 2015 legal action, initiated and funded by local businesses and citizens, Dominion had to submit a new crossing proposal to the Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC) for approval. In February Dominion submitted the application to remove the existing power lines from the bridge and to replace them with new towers spanning the entire Rappahannock River. These new towers would be located just east of the bridge and range in height from 102 feet to 172 feet. The proposed towers would be "H frame" structures with the nearest upright only 86 feet from the bridge roadway; the massive cross-members supporting electrical cables and insulators would be only 72 feet from the roadway. If built, they will forever change and obscure the view of the river and Chesapeake Bay.

The Dominion proposal now before the SCC is a "do-over" of the application it made to the Army Corps of Engineers and to the VMRC in mid-2015. That process was an attempt to fast-track approval by circumventing the SCC. The original application was so flawed that Dominion had to make a 300% increase to their planning estimate of the project because they had failed to consider the depth of the river.

Tall transmission towers have long been recognized as undesirable in certain areas, both urban and rural. This Dominion proposal disregards SCC guidelines for transmission line siting and of normal planning principles. The proposal is based on their contention that it is the least expensive option.

Channel Fenders

To protect the tallest towers, two massive fenders would channel boat traffic in the center of the river. These fenders would be over 150 feet long and 9 feet high. Such fenders may be appropriate in major shipping lanes but not in the unobstructed Rappahannock where there is virtually no commercial shipping. The fenders would be a hazard for sailing vessels and would act to discourage boat traffic under the bridge.

Alternatives

The application process requires Dominion to assess alternate solutions for crossing the river. A detailed review of the application indicates that it fails to address all the alternate solutions. It does consider a possible underground Horizontal Direct Drilling (HDD) solution but provides little information. We believe it has not been competitively priced—a process that would drive down cost.

Norris Bridge Viewshed

The Norris Bridge is the highest major water crossing in Virginia. Research indicates it to be the 20th highest major water crossing in the USA. It offers unparalleled views of the river, mouth of the bay and the surrounding areas. The viewshed includes historic Pop Castle, Carters Creek and the town of Urbanna to the west, and Deltaville in the distance to the east. The view from the bridge is exceptional and is the “Gateway to the Northern Neck”.

Tourism-Based Economy

Lancaster and Middlesex Counties each have a Comprehensive Plan. The plans include preserving and promoting the natural beauty and rural character of the area. Efforts have involved considerable local expense and sacrifice, and they are paying off. Dominion’s proposal to build huge, industrial-style transmission towers across the Rappahannock—with large fenders in the center channel—would run directly counter to those efforts. Local businesses, in combination with state and voluntary organizations, have developed initiatives such as The Virginia Oyster Trail, The Captain John Smith Trail, a Winery Trail and an Artisan Trail, all of which include locations in Middlesex and Lancaster counties.

Organizations Opposed to Towers

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Planning & Recreation Resources Division have both stated that alternates are preferable to towers. Preservation Virginia designated the Lower Rappahannock/Norris one of the Commonwealth’s Most Endangered Historic Places. Over 150 local businesses and organizations have signed opposition declarations.

Dominion’s Accuracy

Dominion has consistently described this crossing as a “rebuild of an existing line” when in actuality it is a new right-of-way alongside the bridge and towers where there were none before. The matter has been further complicated by Dominion’s submission of visual simulations that are so inaccurate that in one instance they show the line coming ashore 1,800 feet away from the bridge when in actuality it would be only 100 feet away. In other instances they have shown too few towers and completely neglected to show the fender system.

Public Comment Period

We have now entered the regulatory phase. Written comments may be submitted to the SCC. The SCC will take comments from the public at hearings on July 6, 2016, at Lancaster County Middle School. These hearings are the opportunity for the community to make its voice heard. We need to make clear to the SCC that towers are a bad idea and that there are much better, more appropriate solutions. Most importantly we need to make it clear that towers will harm the natural beauty of the area, will negatively impact visitor and prospective settler numbers, and will ultimately cause significant economic damage to the area. On September 20, 2016, there will be the formal SCC hearing in Richmond at which Lancaster County and the Save the Rappahannock Coalition will be respondents in the legal proceedings.

Regulatory Decision

The SCC will attempt to strike a balance between the costs and benefits of the proposal to the locality and Virginians as a whole. To date the Dominion proposal focuses solely on costs of construction. Thoughtful, prominent community leaders, planners, and individuals have a vision for our future that protects our values and assets. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

We need to argue to protect that vision and to prevent Dominion from causing irreversible damage through construction of these towers. The SCC needs to hear your opinion. It could make all the difference.

