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Lancaster supervisors reject funding request from Save the Rappahannock Coalition, 4-1

by Audrey Thomasson

LANCASTER—At last Thursday's board of supervisors meeting, everyone agreed they didn't want to see "hideous towers" crossing the Rappahannock River. Who should pay for a citizen-led effort that has stopped Dominion Power from proceeding with the transmission towers was another matter.

Dozens of citizens turned out to voice their opinion on a request for

a \$20,000 contribution to help offset attorney fees of some \$74,000. It was also the first time supervisors learned the county had already spent \$75,000 on its own unsuccessful bid to stop the utility in the local court.

Despite pressure by several community leaders, supervisors voted 4-1 against making a \$20,000 financial contribution to the Save the Rappahannock Coalition's successful efforts that forced Dominion back to the Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC)

for a full review of all options. Supervisors Butch Jenkins, Wally Beauchamp, William Lee and Ernest Palin voted down the request. Only Jason Bellows, an active member of the coalition, voted for financial support.

"It's worth a \$20,000 investment to try to fight it," said Jimmie Carter. "All things being equal, I don't want to see the towers."

"I'm opposed to the towers," said Doug Monroe. He said he first saw the river as a child in 1938. "People

came because of the beauty of the Chesapeake area. (The river) could be destroyed by those towers."

Ammon Dunton Jr., whose family has lived here since the mid-1600s, asked supervisors to stop Dominion from building "...hideous towers... that will destroy the beauty of our front door. When they built the bridge we got a different perspective of the river."

He told supervisors they have a duty to preserve the attractiveness of this area for people who come here

and become a part of the community, adding to the tax base and helping improve the lives of everyone.

Dunton said the power lines were under water before the bridge was built. "Now they say they can't afford it." By tunneling under the riverbed, Dominion would not harm the river, he added.

Jack Chamberlain called the towers ugly. "Ugly will still be ugly," he said.

Ray Carter, a member of the Lan-

LANCASTER, continued on page A2

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Lancaster supervisors reject funding request

continued from page A1

caster County Economic Development Authority (EDA), said he supported the EDA vote to contribute \$20,000 to the coalition efforts. Carter noted Dominion's chief executive officer is paid over \$20 million in compensation. "Not one person in this room wants the towers. First impressions are lasting. The towers are superstructures. They're 18 stories high." While calling the towers Dominion's "bread and butter," he noted the company is putting their lines underground in other parts of the state.

Only a couple of citizens spoke against funding.

Charles Brocklebank told supervisors he was "not in favor of the county funding" the organization's efforts. "It would open the flood gates for other causes to come up here" and request funding, he said.

David Jones noted the county has already spent money to fight the towers. "Who's next? Who else are we going to fund? Should we fund a coalition we have no control over?" Jones asked.

"We're not talking about any old project," said Lloyd Hill. "We're talking about the river. I don't want to see towers. Twenty thousand dollars doesn't seem to me to be a lot of money."

He asked supervisors to look beyond today and toward the

future. "They're not fighting for themselves. They're fighting for all of us," he said.

Judy Fay reminded supervisors the county funds other non-profit groups out of the budget every year. She estimated the coalition had some \$240,000 in pro-bono hours invested by area attorneys, engineers, graphic designers and other professionals fighting against the towers.

"The future of your children, my grandchildren, rests in your hands," said retired U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Jack Sheehan.

"We didn't come to you, you came to us...and asked for our help," said Carl Smith. "We delivered a victory. If we hadn't gotten involved we'd be looking at those towers now. People said it couldn't be done, but we did it."

Smith was instrumental in organizing the Save the Rappahannock Coalition to stop the utility from spoiling the scenic beauty of the river crossing, obstructing the boating channel, and disrupting oyster beds on the river bottom. Members said they want the company to consider reliable options.

Last year, Dominion bypassed the regulatory process claiming the new towers were "routine maintenance" and got the green light from the General Assembly and permits from the Virginia Marine Resources

Commission (VMRC).

The coalition's legal fees to stop Dominion were \$74,500, according to George Bott, a coalition member. He said the group raised \$27,500 from members and supporters, plus an additional \$20,000 from the EDA.

In asking for a \$20,000 contribution, Bott noted the county gives taxpayer funds toward other efforts, such as \$25,000 to the Oyster Trail, and annually gives \$50,000 to the YMCA and another \$50,000 to the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Neck.

Bott testified that Save the Rappahannock's \$20,000 request is not asking for taxpayer funds. "The county has \$354,000 from the sale of property" behind Lancaster High School which is now a nature trail. "That money is not in the rates. It's not in annual appropriations," he said. Bott maintained the funds have remained largely untouched.

Jenkins objected, saying they spent some of those funds to help fund Rappahannock Community College's satellite campus in Kilmarnock.

Charlie Costello said supervisors should contribute to an effort that supports the county's vision to protect the pristine environment.

"Once the view is destroyed, we cannot go back," said Gary Hooper.

While the coalition took on Dominion at the SCC, the county made an unsuccessful attempt to stop the utility through the Circuit Court and sent the county attorney to monitor the SCC hearings, at a cost of some \$75,000, according to county administrator Frank Pleva. Jenkins and Beauchamp expressed shock at the amount and asked Pleva to look into it and report back.

"The board needs better accounting," Jenkins said. He noted the county attorney should have sent an attorney

from the firm who is experienced in working with the SCC. "The county attorney is not qualified," he said.

"I'm distressed to find out how much the county attorney spent," said Beauchamp.

Several supervisors expressed strong views in explaining their vote on a contribution to the coalition's efforts.

"A couple of months ago I asked, 'Do we know how far we're going in this?'" said Palin. "I was not part of a conversation. There was no (upfront) board action."

Jenkins said supervisors had no control over how the process was executed.

"If we do this, we are setting a precedent for future boards," said Beauchamp.

"This is a small investment to make...to stop those towers, to continue the fight," said Bellows. "Most people feel the towers are a bad idea." Bellows said he asked the citizen group to help the board. "It's up to the board to set the vision and determine what's best for this county and its citizens."

He noted the vision of Kilmarnock to bury its lines "was a wise decision" that paid off. Bellows pointed out county support for other endeavors that promote and advance the county. Noting it was not the first time the board has asked for citizen help, he expressed concern for the future of their involvement if "...we ask people to come to the aid of the board and then we do not support their effort." He said the Rappahannock River is in everyone's back yard. The coalition "gave people a voice. Let's keep that voice. Do we want the towers to be this board's legacy?"

Supervisors will hold a special meeting at 5:30 p.m. Monday, February 8, to determine a strategy for moving forward during the SCC review. The meeting will be held at the County Administration Building, 8311 Mary Ball Road, Lancaster.