

Opponents outnumber proponents speaking at SCC hearing on Dominion's proposed towers

by Audrey Thomasson

KILMARNOCK—Lillian Ann Smith is a retired teacher who owns stock in Dominion Resources Inc. She also owns a home within feet of where the company's power and energy division proposes to erect 10 transmission towers across the Rappahannock River.

"My property values will go down...which is okay for me, but not good for the county when property taxes go down," Smith said as one of the first speakers during Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC) public hearings July 6 at Lancaster Middle School.

The hearings gave citizens an opportunity to express their opinions on Dominion Power's application to erect 10 steel and concrete towers near the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge. Opponents want the company to put the lines underground or attach insulated cables to the bridge.

"We don't want our visual integrity trumped by this tower design," Smith told hearing examiner Alexander F. Skirpan Jr. and SCC commissioner Judith Williams Jagdmann, the only SCC commissioner attending the hearings.

Smith was one of an estimated 400 citizens who attended the hearings. Public response appeared overwhelmingly against Dominion Power.

Only three people spoke in favor of the plan, while citizens speaking against the towers spilled over from the 2 p.m. session into the 7 p.m. session. About a dozen people had to leave before their names were called to be heard. The hearings wrapped up just before the cut-off time of 10 p.m.

Former District 99 Del. Albert Pollard chas-



Dozens of citizens spoke during Virginia State Corporation Commission public hearings July 6, including Eddie Blanks, above. Testimony lasted seven-and-a-half hours as the 2 p.m. hearing ran over into the 7 p.m. session.

tised Dominion Power for not being open and honest with the public.

"Dominion Power is a public service corporation...chartered by the state," Pollard said. As such, it has a duty to inform the public; but instead, Dominion has a "pattern of obfuscation," he said.

For example, while the company initially reported the towers would increase 2 to 14 feet,

the actual increase was up to 41 feet, Pollard said. Dominion's report to the Lancaster board of supervisors only showed one tower that didn't represent the actual size, he added.

Several speakers noted the company's online drawing of the towers misrepresented their height, location and how they would appear to drivers as they crossed the bridge.

It wasn't until citizens got involved that the

truth came out, Pollard said. "This whole controversy could have been avoided."

Engineering consultant Ian Omersher of Irvington said Dominion's plans would put the power lines closer to the bridge than in any other place in the U.S.

"It connects rural communities, not industrialized areas. The current towers are ugly, but they are built with natural materials so they blend with the trees in the background," said Omersher. Also, because they are located near the shoreline, they do not obstruct the view for most of the crossing.

Peter Mansfield of Middlesex, a mechanical engineer and Middlesex County supervisor, said the board of supervisors passed a resolution that the line go underground. "Dominion has a line that goes under the creek...where I live...because it was cheaper." He noted that on Lake Erie, power lines are underwater for 100 miles. Also, he said the company shouldn't have to trench the muddy riverbed. "Lay the line and it will sink into the mud."

Cost estimates

After noting Dominion's disparity between overly high estimates to actual costs on other crossing projects, Omersher said, "There is definitely something wrong with the way Dominion prices their crossings."

Attorney Ammon Dunton Jr. of Merry Point said he asked Dominion's estimator how he arrived at \$90 million to take the line underground.

After discussing the need to trench for three separate lines, "...he said he didn't want to be embarrassed if he came out too low," Dunton

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SCC hearing on towers attracts crowd

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said. "Dominion did not put it out for bids. They did not develop reasonable specifications for the project. I'm quite sure it would be a lot less than that—maybe the same price as the towers."

"We need better estimates" of costs for putting power lines underwater, said Jeff Szyperski of Irvington. Speaking as a banker, he said "Tourism is the lead dog in making this economy work." People became residents after they stayed at the Tides Inn or came here by boat or vacationed here. But he said the population has been declining.

"We're trying to engender some kind of recovery here. We do not need any more headwinds," said Szyperski.

Marty Mothershead of Warsaw was one of three people who spoke in favor of the towers. Representing Northern Neck Electric Cooperative's interest, he stated the company buys power from Dominion for the co-op's 18,000 customers on the Northern Neck.

"We are concerned about reliability. We do not believe attaching the line to the bridge is a good scenario," he said, noting an overhead line will last 40 years, while an underground line has a lifespan of just 20 years.

However, when asked by an SCC attorney how often power attached to the bridge has been shut off, Mothershead replied, "Not very often. Once a couple of years ago."

Under further questioning, he said his comments were not based on any studies on attaching insulated lines to the bridge or trenching the riverbed.

Tourism

Citizens referred to the county's comprehensive plan calling for protection of natural resources and the economy's dependence on tourists and retirees. It was mentioned that Lancaster ranks seventh in the state for tourism, while Middlesex is fifth.

Dunton said the county has experienced a decline in the seafood and agriculture industries and increased dependence on tourism and retirees.

"The view from the bridge is one of the scenic highlights in Virginia. Preservation Virginia has called it...a statewide treasure that needs to be preserved. There is not a site of industrial activity anywhere. Suddenly, we are faced with huge towers and fenders."

Tides Inn general manager Gordon Slatford said, "Resorts

are created in locations that offer natural beauty. The uniqueness of this area will be permanently desecrated" by the towers. He stated that Dominion has been cavalier in dissemination of information and that consultation with tourism partners, historic sights and other local agencies was not part of the process until it was forced on them.

"The only thing we can sell here is our quality of life," said Jimmie Carter of Mosquito Point. Noting the local economy has not seen recovery from the recession, and concern that the towers will hurt the area's tourism and flow of retirees moving here, he said, "We don't know what straw will break the camel's back."

Carter said between Northern Virginia and Maine there are 15 bridges with water crossings wider than one mile, "...none have towers."

"If we lose our economic base, contractors will close shop and go bust, retail will be shuttered," said Dermot McNulty.

Gary L. Hooper of Irvington stressed the importance of enticing retirees to the county and their impact on the economy because they build homes here, with a high percentage of the materials and labor coming from local sources. The number of retirees in Lancaster's population increased from 28% in 2000 to 35% in 2014, while the state retirement population is at 14%, he said.

"It's time for Dominion to care about our resources and future," said Hooper.

Tower Impact

"I represent the majority of Lancaster County who don't agree that the power line should go underwater," said Morattico resident James Vick. "There's only one reason the York River line went under water and that's the Navy."

Vick said he worked on transmission lines as an occupation.

"Over 99% of tower lines are overhead lines. There's 25 feet of mud on the river bottom. No one knows what is under that river." He said transmission towers have not prevented people from visiting or building in sight of transmission towers in areas like Hampton Roads and Portsmouth.

Roy Carter of White Stone said other areas with towers are in heavily populated areas with a lot of industry around, but that there is no industry in Lancaster County.

"When people go to the beach, they go for the beach. When they

go here, they're going for the natural beauty...Once you get 20 seconds onto the bridge, you have an unobstructed view of the river...The (proposed) towers will be a huge distraction. The cross wires on those towers are wider than the bridge," he added.

As a national lecturer on how businesses can increase their base, Roy Carter said he tells executives the first impression is the most important. The towers will take away that "first impression...and harm our economy. People won't come here," he said.

He cited winter unemployment statistics in Lancaster that are twice that of the state, an indication of the impact of tourism on the county's economy.

In addition, he said the county is trying to build the tourist base through attractions like the artisan trail, wine trail and the oyster trail, which the state also embraced. The quality of the area's oysters attracts visitors to area restaurants, he said.

"Our economy is based on tourism. If we hurt tourism, we hurt the whole state of Virginia," said Roy Carter.

Safety and security

Sailing enthusiasts claimed the proposed fenders for guiding

boaters through the tower and bridge structure will be a navigational hazard, especially at night and in high winds or fog.

Former professor of technology engineering and program design William James Haynie said that, unlike other speakers, he believes Dominion does care. However, in this case they are wrong, Haynie said. The towers are accessible to terrorists and can be hit by a barge, he noted. While sailing on the river, Haynie said he's gotten into such bad weather that he "...would not make it through those fenders. With the wind against me it would take three tacks..." to make it through, he said.

"The Coast Guard should have weighed in on this," said Bruce Julian. "The fenders are a serious hazard."

"Dominion's proposal would add towers where there are none today," said Lancaster Sheriff Patrick McCranie. He noted the fenders would present obstacles for boaters which would result in accidents and require involvement by first responders.

"Dominion has evaded even polite discussion with the public," said Irvington councilman Mike Merrill. He noted

that having 200-foot fenders is asking for trouble, while the towers present "diminished security."

Ret. U.S. Marine Corps General John Sheehan said the events of 9/11 have changed the way we live. "Eighty-five percent of our nation's key infrastructure is privately owned by companies like Dominion...but very little additional security has been made by companies like Dominion."

Sheehan said no one is immune to terrorist attacks anymore, as recent events have demonstrated. "Dominion has a duty to provide safe, secure electricity to its customers. This is a different world. It's time to put the lines underground," he said.

Next step

The SCC hearing process will continue at 10 a.m. September 20 in the SCC second-floor courtroom in the Tyler Building, 1300 East Main Street, Richmond. Witnesses will only be heard at the beginning of the meeting.

Written public comments may be submitted online to the SCC until September 13. Refer to case number PUE 2016-00021 on the comment page at scc.virginia.gov/case/publiccomments.aspx.