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SCC rules Dominion must address two additional alternatives for replacing the transmission lines crossing the Rappahannock

by Audrey Thomasson

RICHMOND—A Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC) hearing examiner on Friday granted a motion by William Barnhardt requiring Dominion Power to submit two additional alternatives for replacing the 1.9-mile transmission line across the Rappahannock River.

Alexander Skirpan's ruling is a victory for citizens opposed to Dominion's application to place 10 megatowers across the river to carry new cables.

According to Barnhardt's attorney, Michael York, the alternatives Dominion will now be required to examine include replacing the existing cables with insulated cables housed in conduit or trays and attached to the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge; and burying the cables in a trench along the bottom of the river with horizontally drilled sections underneath the shallow areas on the north and south banks.

"This is an important ruling and will require Dominion to put price tags on these additional alternatives," said York. "We believe both alternatives will prove to be more reliable, more feasible and less costly than Dominion's proposed towers."

"We applaud the SCC for making this requirement. Dominion should have considered all options available before requesting new taller towers all the way across the river," said Carl Smith, representing the tower opposition group Save the Rappahannock.

"There are alternative solutions that can provide reliable power ... without the negative impact of the towers."

In Dominion's response to the motion, the company claimed it should not have to submit additional information because they have already studied and rejected the suggested alternatives. Additionally, they said shifting the line to the bridge would require power stations and additional cables at a significant weight increase and that attaching to the bridge would not be prudent "...when the future of that existing structure is uncertain." Dominion noted that Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) had previously said it wanted the existing power cables removed from the bridge.

Lancaster County joined with Barnhardt, owner of a restaurant at the foot of the bridge, in responding that Dominion incorrectly stated VDOT's position. The county submitted an affidavit from bridge engineer Michael A. Mathews P.E. containing minutes of his meeting with senior VDOT engineers. According to Mathews, VDOT indicated replacing the bridge is a low priority and that VDOT would "consider a cooperative effort with Dominion to undertake repairs and/or renovations of the Norris Bridge that would include attachment of the transmission lines" to the bridge.

According to York, new insulated cables should not need to be de-ener-

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gized during bridge maintenance, as required for the existing cables.

In response to Dominion's claims that burying the cables in the river would cause temporary disturbances to the river bottom, Barnhardt's motion notes that Dominion currently operates an underwater distribution line across the Rappahannock River south of Tappahannock.

The line was installed with the same underwater trenching and drilling combination that Skirpan ruled Dominion should address in its transmission line application, said York.

"It's understandable that Dominion initially preferred an expensive series of large transmission towers, but we believe they now understand there are much better alternatives," said York. "More importantly, they should recognize that none of the alternatives would destroy the beauty of the lower Rappahannock that has drawn the large public outcry against its plan."

York called on Dominion to meet with Lancaster County, VDOT and others to resolve this controversy and avoid the unnecessary time and expense of continued litigation.

In response to Skirpan's ruling, Dominion representative Daisy Pridgen said, "Dominion will abide by the State Corporation Commission's ruling as it always has. We feel it is important to keep the process moving forward because we have an obligation to provide safe and reliable service to the people of the Northern Neck."

On July 25, Skirpan, the examiner who presided at the SCC's public hearings in Kilmarnock, requested a pre-hearing conference call of the parties. That call will take place at 2 p.m., Tuesday, August 2, in the Tyler Building, 1300 East Main Street, Richmond. Participants may either call in or be present. New dates will be set for follow-up hearings at that time.

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