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VMRC approves permit application for power line project on Rappahannock River despite local protests

by Renss Greene

NEWPORT NEWS—The Virginia Marine Resources Commission on July 28 approved a permit application from Dominion Virginia Power seeking authorization to put new steel pilings for transmission lines across the Rappahannock River.

The new infrastructure would be erected east of the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge, replacing the power lines which are currently attached to the bridge.

VMRC staff recommended several conditions, including restrictions pre-

venting pile driving between February 15 and June 30 to protect migrating fish, and within 600 feet of any active peregrine falcon nest between February 15 and July 15. The conditions also require bubble curtains around pile driving in shallow waters, which protects fish from damaging noise, and a total \$64,120 royalty to the state.

The application faced resistance from Lancaster and Middlesex residents, who came to the public hearing to ask the state to consider requiring the lines go underground under the river.

"It's a critical piece of infrastructure for Dominion," said project manager Wes Keck. "That said, this is what we call a reliability project."

Keck said the river crossing helps assure service in the Northern Neck in case of line damage elsewhere, and that the current lines were installed in 1962 to outdated standards in a salt-water environment.

However, going underground with the lines, Keck said, would be expensive and inconvenient for customers.

"If a line came down, which is very

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Power lines

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rare, we could get it up within a day or two," Keck said. "With a submarine cable, or a pipe-type cable under the water, we're talking months."

Keck said Dominion estimates that underwater lines would be 4 to 5 times more expensive than the overhead lines, over the life of the lines.

"The residents of Lancaster County and the board of supervisors are vehemently opposed," said Jason Bellows, chairman of the Lancaster board of supervisors. Bellows presented a petition opposed to the application with 185 signatures. He also told the VMRC that Lancaster supervisors have passed a resolution opposed to Dominion's application.

Bellows said local boards of supervisors were not consulted on the project.

"I think that a project of this scope, that has such an impact on the local communities, that the local boards of supervisors should have some input on this process, and these alternatives should be more thoroughly vetted," Bellows said.

Lancaster county administrator Frank Pleva agreed with Bellows at the hearing.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Pleva said. "Once this project is put in, it's going to be there 40 to 50 years from now."

Pleva asked the VMRC to halt the permitting process while a third party looks at underground alternatives. He pointed out that the proposed power lines would be higher than the level of the bridge, which Keck confirmed: The bridge reaches 165 feet over the water at its peak, while the towers would reach up to 180 feet.

Keck responded that Dominion has reduced the height of the towers to the absolute minimum clearances allowed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard.

"Maybe some third party that has some engineering or marine science background could look at these alternatives," Pleva said. "Cost is obviously a factor. We just think it's not the only factor."

Emily Davies of Urbanna prompted the public hearing by objecting to the application after spotting a notice in the *Southside Sentinel*.

"Although I do support replacement of the existing power line, I'm concerned about the lack of transparency of this process, in that it has minimized

public involvement, and as a result has eliminated the need for further discussion of project alternatives," Davies said. "I'm the only person that wrote a written objection to this whole project, and my understanding is, without that, there wouldn't even be a public hearing."

VMRC associate board member John E. Zydron of Chesapeake moved to approve the application, seconded by James Minor III of Richmond.

"I think we need to look at the public in general," Zydron said. "I don't think anybody likes to be without power, so it's not just the people who live on the river, it's the people who live in the county."

Zydron added that VMRC must consider its jurisdiction.

"It ain't the sky," Zydron said. "It's not the view. It's the sub-aquatic grounds down there."

Board member A.J. Erskine of Kilmarnock, aquaculture manager for Cowart Seafood and Bevans Seafood, supported the motion.

"I think the applicant has done a fairly good job minimizing the environmental impacts, and I understand the opposition is more or less an aesthetic issue," Erskine said. "That is taken into consideration in this commission."

The motion to approve Dominion's application was approved with staff-recommended conditions, 8-0-1, with commission member Lynn Haynie of Reedville abstaining due to a conflict of interest.