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## Power towers earn regulatory approval to begin construction

by *Renss Greene*

KILMARNOCK—Dominion Power received U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approval for its project to replace power lines across the Rappahannock River on August 20, according to the company website.

Dominion's plan is to remove the existing lines from the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge and install new ones suspended from 10 steel towers across the river, 100 feet east of the bridge and reaching 180-foot tall. The project has been controversial on both sides of the river, but earned unanimous Virginia Marine Resources Commission approval last month.

The Corps of Engineers application is reviewed by several federal agencies, including the U.S. Coast Guard and Environmental Protection Agency. It was the last regulatory hurdle the project had to clear before beginning construction activities.

Residents of Middlesex and Lancaster counties have called for the overhead lines to be cancelled and replaced with underwater lines, such as Dominion operates under the Piankatank, York, and James rivers.

Dominion has argued that underwater lines would bring extra cost with no benefit.

"Submerging a transmission line does not provide any operational, maintenance, or reliability benefits and unduly adds risk into the system by prolonging outages due to the increase in restoration time," wrote Dominion director of electric transmission projects Bob McGuire in an open letter to Lancaster board of supervisors chairman Jason Bellows on August 21. Bellows has been at the forefront of the push to run the power lines underwater. He has contacted county and town governments, encouraging them to pass resolutions mirroring one by Lancaster which supports replacing the aging power lines, but opposes constructing steel towers across the Rappahannock.



**Dominion external affairs manager James Beazley makes the case for overhead lines across the Rappahannock during a short-notice meeting with members of Kilmarnock town council and staff.**

Lancaster and Middlesex counties have passed resolutions.

Bellows, along with a coalition of local activists, have argued the lines would disrupt the view of the river and the view from the bridge towards the Chesapeake Bay.

Dominion has also estimated that running the lines underground would be four to five times more expensive, increasing electricity rates.

"It is hard to justify to a ratepayer in another county the increase in their utility bill to cover costs associated with a project that does not gain any additional reliability benefit to the system," McGuire wrote. "In a time when every dollar matters and we have customers barely making ends meet, I could not in good conscious [sic] ask them to shoulder the burden of paying for the subjective aesthetics of a few."

Project cost estimates come from Dominion and have not been independently verified, but a 2006 study by the Virginia Joint Legislative Audit

and Review Commission agrees that "underground lines are typically four to ten times more expensive than overhead lines."

Included in those concerns are the difficulties involved in repairing an underwater line.

In a short-notice meeting with members of Kilmarnock's town council and staff, Dominion external affairs manager James Beazley said repairs to underwater lines take "weeks to a month," where overhead lines can be repaired in 12-24 hours.

Tom Larson is the vice president of engineering at A&N Electric Cooperative, which supplies electricity to Tangier Island with an underground line from the Eastern Shore near Onancock to Watts Island, where the line goes aboveground, then underground again to Tangier. Larson agreed that repairing storm damage to the line related to the line coming

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aboveground at Watts Island took time.

"It was a considerable amount of time," Larson said. "Certainly several days, it may have stretched into weeks."

Larson said most of that time was taken up while divers located and inspected the line to find the fault, but the actual repair takes no longer than a day or two.

"The biggest enemy is age,"

Larson said. "Any underground line has some finite age."

On the other hand, Larson said, it's rare that A&N loses service along its line to Tangier. That line requires three conducting lines to operate, but was laid with four.

"So that means if one should fail, we can do some reconnecting at each end and get the thing back in service while we fix the faulted conductor,"

Larson said. "That has been very helpful as well. But it's not very often that we have a problem with it."

Larson said the line to Tangier is also not especially prone to damage.

"It is vulnerable if anybody were to drag an anchor, although my understanding is it was plowed in back when it was installed, so it's not laying on the surface, it's underneath the sediment," Larson said.

Beazley told Kilmarnock staff and council members that putting the lines underground would require additional easements and property on land.

"We have a small transmission corridor right now," Beazley said. "If we would do anything underground, you have to tie in your aboveground facilities with your underground facilities, so that means we need extra easements. We

need what you call terminal buildings, where you're tying in your cables. You need a fair amount of land on that, about 2 acres, and an additional right of way. We don't have that land."

Council members debated the pros and cons of an underwater line.

"The people that will benefit from an underground transmission line, an underwater transmission line, is this big," said council member Michael Sutherland, making a small gesture. "And the people that will benefit by not having to pay up to an additional \$90 million in their rates is this big," he said, with a large gesture.

"I think as far as the council, that we should stand with our neighbors," retorted vice mayor Rebecca Nunn. "Irvington is opposed to this, our board of supervisors is opposed to this, Middlesex is opposed to this."

Nunn also had pointed questions for Beazley.

"How come it went under the York?" she asked. "How come it's under the Piankatank? How come it's under the James? How come it's under the Mattaponi? How come it's under the Pamunkey?"

"I just don't think Virginia Power has been very transparent on the whole issue," said council member Dr. Curtis Smith, echoing sentiments expressed at the VMRC. "The whole thing smells," he added.

The power line does not require Virginia State Corporation Commission approval, which only regulates lines above 138 kilovolts. The proposed line is 115 kilovolts.

Bellows has invited representatives from Dominion, local governments and state legislators to a meeting Tuesday, August 25, after press deadlines.