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County appeals VMRC decision

by Audrey Thomasson

LANCASTER—The Lancaster board of supervisors last week filed an appeal challenging the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) decision to allow Dominion Virginia Power to replace the overhead transmission power line across the Rappahannock River.

The notice of appeal, filed in Lancaster County Circuit Court August 25, restates the county's support for installation of a new underwater transmission line instead, as was done on other rivers in the state.

Board chairman Jason Bellows said the action should stop Dominion Power from proceeding until the appeal receives judicial review.

"If Dominion Power proceeds with construction of these looming towers—taller than the bridge itself—it will despoil one of the Commonwealth's most valuable economic assets," Bellows stated.

"We all want to ensure reliable access to electricity for the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck," he continued. "However, we must do so in a way that does not sacrifice one of our most treasured assets. The unobstructed views both of the bridge and from the bridge belong to all Virginians. They are both an aesthetic asset and an economic asset to our community. They do not belong to Dominion Power."

Dominion: Underwater power lines 'not realistic'

by Renss Greene

IRVINGTON—Addressing a stakeholders meeting on August 25, Dominion Virginia Power representatives indicated that discussing alternatives to its proposed overhead power lines spanning the Rappahannock River near the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge is "not a realistic outcome."

"Realistically, I don't necessarily know if there's much to talk about," said project communications manager Greg Mathe. "We have all the permits approved for an overhead transmission line. The cost is not something that Dominion is willing to put on the backs of other ratepayers for a three to five times more expensive line. We're talking through the construction process right now."

Mathe reiterated the utility's arguments for the project at the meeting, which brought together government and community organizations from both sides of the river at the Tides Inn. He pointed to the higher cost and shorter lifespan of underground lines. The project will replace the current seven footings and 14 bridge attachments with 10 concrete and steel towers next to and higher than the bridge.

Lancaster County board of supervisors chairman Jason Bellows, who organized the meeting, said the process of designing and approving the new towers was "completely un-transparent" and excluded local government.

Bellows said this type of community meeting should have taken place at the beginning of the project.

"We should have had all the communities who were going to be affected at the table as decision makers planning this together," Bellows said. "When Dominion showed up to the board of supervisors in May, when it really got onto our radar, they showed up and said 'here it is, hope you like it.'"

Others disputed Dominion's claim that the company notified residents near the bridge.

"Something must have gotten past me, because of the 12 homes on High Bank, only one person, who happened to be our president who lives in Richmond, received the notice," said Hilda Page. High Bank is a residential area overlooking the bridge from the Lancaster side.

Lancaster County administrator rank Pleva admitted that Dominion representatives had met with county staff in May, but said information at that time was very vague, and that additional meetings were promised which never happened. At that time,

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Dominion

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there were no conceptual drawings available.

“At the time it was conceptual engineering and it wouldn’t have done justice to take a picture of something that was already in flux,” Mathe said. “We fully disclosed that it would be an overhead line.”

Mathe said schematics of the structures were available in the 115-page joint permit application on Dominion’s website. As of press time, that application

is still available on Dominion’s web pages.

“Moving into the VMRC permitting process, I feel like there was enough information to get an idea of what the line would look like,” Mathe said.

Artist renderings of the towers next to the bridge, which have also been at issue in this debate, were not available until days before the project’s hearing at the VMRC.

“We followed the permitting application,” Mathe said. “They don’t require visual impacts. We filled out the application to its fullest. We followed the rules and regulations involved.”

“The view that you didn’t show was the view from the bridge,” said Carl Smith, president of the Dyer Creek Environmental Preservation Association. “The view that you did show was the view from five miles upriver, from five miles

out to the bay, but not the one that twenty-some-thousand people will see every day. This is the view that’s going to characterize our region, and you’re taking that from us. That’s what this amounts to: A taking.”

“We made a conscious decision not to take that picture because of safety reasons,” Mathe explained earlier in the meeting. “We didn’t have a way to close down the bridge to get our photographer on the bridge to take that kind of picture.”

“Dominion is a business,” said Joy Gwaltney. “They’ve got a bottom line. That may be our Jordan, but it’s just water to Dominion.”

Bellows closed the meeting saying the community “wants to work with” Dominion.

“Is Dominion listening?” he asked. “I certainly hope that they are, and that they’re willing to come to the table.”