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Bridge conditions added to towers discussion
by Audrey Thomasson

KILMARNOCK—Sen. Ryan McDougle met Monday afternoon with key players in the dispute over Dominion Power's plans to disconnect power lines from the Norris Bridge across the Rappahannock River and relocate the line onto 10 steel structures about 100 feet east of the bridge.

The closed session was held at the Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) Fredericksburg office and included representatives from Lancaster and Middlesex, VDOT's bridge division and Dominion Power. McDougle had agreed to call all the parties together as a result of his discussion of the project last week with Lancaster County Republicans.

During that visit, the issue circled around to the aging Norris Bridge and what role it played in the controversy. The questions became: Why is the bridge too weak to support new power lines, yet strong enough not to be replaced? If more structures are installed, are they limiting the location for a replacement bridge? And can a temporary solution for the utility be mediated until the bridge issue is resolved?

Leading up to those questions, residents from Middlesex and Lancaster counties put some tough questions to Sen. McDougle, Del. Margaret Ransone and Dominion.

Did Dominion mislead local officials?

Dominion Power representatives held fast to claims they followed all procedures and properly notified Lancaster County of project plans to replace the towers last fall and again in May.

“You did not show the height of the structure until you had approval” from VMRC, said District 1 supervisor Butch Jenkins.

Supervisors insisted they have always called for an underground line. Jenkins said the power company has not been transparent with details or sketches of the project and that promised follow-up never materialized.

McDougle and Ransone claimed Virginia Power told them the power lines were at a critical stage and that the county had no objections to new towers.

“It seemed like a logical direction to go,” said McDougle, who wrote Senate Bill 1030 approving the project. “We try to do the best we can with the information we have. We’ve asked Dominion to go back and re-look at it. I don’t want towers more than anyone else, but I want people on this side of the river to have power.”

“In passing that bill with an expedited review...you’ve left us with this problem,” said Joy Gwaltney.

Emily Davies said both legislators failed to contact any local officials. Davies criticized their failure to consider their constituents by exploring other options before rushing to draft a bill that sailed through the General Assembly.

The Record’s General Assembly coverage as early as January 15 mentioned SB 1030, to authorize the Virginia Marine Resources Commission to convey an easement and right of way to Dominion Virginia Power to construct an overhead transmission line across the Rappahannock River in Middlesex and Lancaster.

Additionally, McDougle and Ransone declined a Freedom of Information Act request from Lancaster County asking for copies of their correspondence with Dominion. Both cited an exemption under Virginia Code regarding working papers and correspondence of a member of the General Assembly.

However, the law does allow disclosure at a member’s discretion.

When asked how much money Dominion donates to members of the General Assembly, Greg Mathe, the company’s public relations representative, said he didn’t know.

“According to the Virginia Public Awareness Project, Dominion executives, employees and lobbyists have contributed approximately \$1.5-\$1.6 million to state political campaigns in this election cycle,” said Carl Smith.

McDougle and Ransone have accepted donations from the utility company.

“Dominion does a lot of good with its contributions to nonprofits,” replied Mathe.

“The General Assembly is not a nonprofit,” several people responded.

Citizens accused Dominion of pushing the tower project through the process without conducting an environmental study or being sensitive to its impact on the scenic and historic features of the river and bridge.

Others accused Dominion and the legislators of stomping on the rights of watermen by seizing rights to public oyster grounds in order to install the 10 steel towers that would span the river at heights ranging from 112 to 179 feet.

According to Mathe, the Army Corps of Engineers did not require a study.

“Was there an economic impact analysis done on this proposal?” asked Smith.

“No,” Mathe replied.

“No one has looked at the visual aspect of this project—one of the concerns for citizens,” said Len Engstrom.

“It wasn’t overlooked,” replied Wes Keck, Dominion Power project manager. “We weighed the visual impact with the costs...We did not want to put the additional rate for it on the backs of rate payers.”

“We’re paying for saving the view for those in Yorktown and Alexandria,” Engstrom replied, noting those costs are shared by all customers across the state.

Dominion Power confirmed they’ve installed underground cables in several other counties.

Underground line costs

Del. Ransone defended her support of the towers, saying she didn’t want to put a rate increase on the poor.

District 3 supervisor Jason Bellows argued the proposed towers would take a bigger toll on the poor, “...because we’re dependent on tourism for jobs. Find a solution that will benefit everyone.”

Dominion conceded the power line from Middlesex is the back-up system for the lower Northern Neck with the main

trunk line coming from Warsaw. But they added it is critical to having an additional power source to the area. Keck stood fast on an estimated cost of underground cable at \$235 million versus \$30 million for towers.

However, citizens noted it had vastly overestimated the cost for the 3.5-mile York River project with actual costs being \$85 million. Since the Rappahannock River is just 2.4 miles across, they figured the cost should be closer to \$60 - 65 million.

Charlie Costello responded that using the adjusted figure, the increase to each customer's bill would be two cents a month, for a total increase over 30 years of \$12.34.

"Who can't afford two cents a month?" Costello asked. "Even the poorest of us can afford that."

Ransone noted that her home power bills are \$300 to \$400 a month, her oyster business power bill runs into thousands of dollars and that she isn't willing to bear the increase.

"This is not just about you," said Ransone. "I'm not going to pass this on to other businesses. Rate increases and line outages also impact Northern Neck Cooperative customers because they buy power from Dominion."

Replacing the bridge

Roger Martin suggested the power line project should be viewed together with replacement of the Norris Bridge because the large number of proposed towers would severely limit options on where a new bridge could be located. “We need to focus on coordinating the two together in alignment,” he said.

Previous reports indicated the bridge was due to be replaced between 2015-20, but is off VDOT’s schedule due to lack of funding. Completion of the bridge painting project was also suspended after funding ran out. It will require an additional \$10 million to complete. Currently, VDOT has indicated it is considering weight restrictions on the bridge.

Dominion was advised the bridge can no longer support the cable and that the power line interferes with bridge work. Neither the cable height or bridge meet current regulations for safety, it was reported.

“It’s too weak to handle power cables...yet big trucks go across that bridge, not one at a time, but in herds,” Martin said. “We should focus on coordinating the projects together...get a small group of people together in one room—key people at the transportation commission, Dominion, and local governments on both sides of the river—for collaborative problem solving.”

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard yet,” said Ransone.

“Somebody named Norris led that charge 58 years ago. It would be nice if someone would lead that charge again,” Martin suggested.

McDougle said the problem rural areas are facing is that all the transportation tax dollars for this district go to the Fredericksburg area. “We’ve been trying to change how VDOT prioritizes that and get them to focus on safety.”

“This is an opportunity for a public/private partnership between VDOT and Dominion Power for this crossing,” Jenkins offered. “What we need here is to buy time...in order to come up with a temporary solution.”

McDougle agreed and promised to set up the meeting.

Last Friday, Dominion Power mailed customers three documents explaining its position and why they are proceeding with the tower project.

On Monday, Lancaster County filed an appeal of VMRC’s approval of the project in Circuit Court.

“Our petition includes a request for the permit to be placed ‘on hold’ while the matter is before the Court,” said county attorney Jim Cornwell.

also:



This rendering was prepared by Ian Ormesher for the NoTowers.org website and professes to show how the proposed towers will look to drivers as they cross the Norris Bridge. Dominion officials reviewed the rendering and said they will issue their own version next week.