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### Crisis at substation could be major problem for firefighters

#### Opponents show up to voice concerns over PATH

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By [Ed Waters Jr.](#)

The director of Frederick County fire services painted a vivid picture Wednesday of what could happen if a disaster hit a proposed substation.

Thomas W. Owens, director of the Division of Fire and Rescue Services, was the first speaker at a lengthy hearing before the Frederick County Board of Zoning Appeals. The board heard input from representatives of Potomac Edison and PATH LLC, which wants to build a large substation on Bartholow's Road near Mount Airy. The board also heard input from groups and individuals on the impact of the substation on their community.

Lara Roholt Westdorp, chairwoman of the zoning panel, noted that the county and the utility company had "agreed to disagree" on final authority over the substation. Westdorp said the Maryland Public Service Commission has authority on the Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highline's electric power lines, but the county has the say on the substation. Robert Cannon, chief attorney for the utility company, said his group was there to present its case, but waived any agreement that the county would have final authority. The utility company, if turned down by the zoning board, can appeal to the Circuit Court.

PATH LLC was before the board seeking a special exception to locate the substation on a 150-acre site. The substation, which would be about the size of two Francis Scott Key Malls, would be an integral part of PATH, a \$2.1 billion, 275-mile electric power line across three states, a joint project of Allegheny Energy and American Electric Power.

The utility company says the line and substation are needed to avoid potential blackouts by 2015 in the region because of increased energy demand. Residents and two community groups, the Sugarloaf Conservancy and Citizens Against the Kempton Electric Substation (CAKES), have voiced their opposition to the project based on visual, environmental, safety and property value impacts, and whether the project is needed in light of the economic downturn and reduced demand for energy.

Considering the number of witnesses for both the utility company and opponents, Westdorp said she expected to continue the hearing on a later date. The hearing began at 1 p.m. and was to continue until 11 p.m.

Owens said he had not seen the specifics of the Kempton substation, but related his experience with fires in such facilities during his 40-year career. Owens said that although such fires are rare, there are factors involved that make them significantly different from other types of fires.

Owens said one major aspect is the type of oil used in transformers to cool the equipment. Mineral-based oil, such as that proposed for the substation, is combustible. Even if properly spaced, once one transformer suffers a "breach" in its casing and is on fire, that can quickly spread to adjacent transformers and other electrical equipment.

In most cases, Owens said, the equipment is "ruined, and we let the fire burn itself up." Even if they arrive quickly, firefighters can't do much until someone from the utility company shuts off power to the substation. Utility company representatives said the facility would be monitored 24 hours a day, but it could take a half-hour to an hour to get someone on the scene to de-energize the substation.

One of the major problems is smoke, Owens said, which could spread because of winds. That could mean evacuating the neighborhood. "I've only been on three such fires. We let them burn themselves out. But the last one took two days."

Fire-suppressing foam could be used, he said, but Frederick County, and even surrounding counties, do not have adequate foam equipment to fight such a fire. "We can't get help from neighbors. The closest fire department that would have the equipment is BWI Airport." Frederick County does have some foam equipment, but only enough to use for small fires, Owens said, and there is nothing in the budget for more equipment like that.

Asked about the possibility of terrorists hitting the site, Owens said there are many "soft targets" such as utility facilities. The substation will not have anyone on-site once it is completed, but will be surrounded by fencing with barbed wire and other security measures the utility company would not discuss.



Photo by Sam Yu

Patience Wait of Shepherdstown, W.Va., passes out anti-PATH stickers just before the start of the Wednesday evening session of the Frederick County Board of Zoning Appeals at Winchester Hall to consider the large electric power line project in Frederick County.

Michael J. Hosier, general manager for transmission projects for Allegheny Energy, said the company hopes to begin construction in the latter part of 2011 and complete the substation by 2015.

Opponents planned to use photos and maps of the community to show how close the substation would be to about 1,300 homes.

The main meeting room at Winchester Hall was filled with residents of the area where the substation will be built, and an overflow crowd was seated in an upstairs meeting room watching the testimony via a TV link.

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