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Determine true need for power lines

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The lingering recession has been unquestionably hard on families across America, but it has had at least one positive side effect: a lower demand for energy.

For residents in southern Frederick County, that could mean a reprieve from the proposed Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline, known as PATH, a 275-mile line that if approved would run from West Virginia to southern Frederick County.

Allegheny Power and American Electric Power have been planning to build the line to shore up the aging power grid in 13 states and Washington, D.C. by 2012, though a recent preliminary analysis estimates that the grid should be reliable until 2016 without PATH.

That analysis points to the recession as a factor in lower energy demand. In fact, the economic slowdown has already played a role in halting a smaller project that just a few years ago seemed inevitable, the so-called "Urbana loop" that Allegheny Power proposed to build in the two miles between the Villages of Urbana and Lynn Street, just south of Sugarloaf Estates.

In 2004, Allegheny officials said the line was needed to meet the expected growing demand, but demand eased in the waning days of the economic boom and the onset of the recession. The company later scaled down the plans to upgrade existing lines and substations.

Now, a recent preliminary analysis indicates that the recession has also pushed back the need for PATH from the original 2012 to 2016.

The changing market conditions that led to that four-year extension should give state regulators pause when determining the true need for PATH, and even the alternatives could play.

In fact, governors from 10 states on the Eastern seaboard wrote a letter last spring to congressional leaders encouraging federal policies to encourage investment in both onshore and offshore wind energy.

While not directly related to PATH, the governors' letter indicates a meaningful willingness on the part of state elected leaders to support alternative energy. Transmission lines will still be necessary even if the electricity is created by wind, but perhaps the routes would be different from what has been proposed for PATH.

Either way, it would be a shame to build a new transmission line based on outdated plans and demands.