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The Fight against PATH Project

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The Sugarloaf Conservancy wants Allegheny Energy's application for a proposed 765-kilovolt transmission line denied by the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC). The proposed line is enormous in both size of its towers and the power it transmits when

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compared to existing transmission lines currently located in Frederick,

According to research done by Sugarloaf Conservancy President Doug Kaplan, none of the power will be available to Frederick County residents, with only 14 percent used elsewhere in Maryland.

The Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highway (PATH) would also require the construction of a 53-acre substation in the center of a residential neighborhood in Mount Airy where 1,300 residential houses have been built.

The Conservancy worries fire, an act of terrorism, or a tornado could cause resident's well water to become contaminated.

"The contaminants from the transformer will sink into the ground. No one can live there. It doesn't make sense," Kaplan said.

The emission of harmful radiation from electromagnetic fields is also a big concern. "Studies have already made a connection between [the fields and] childhood leukemia and Alzheimers, even with the lower voltage lines. What will happen down the line? It will be too late," said Peggy Kaplan, Sugarloaf Conservancy secretary.

Potomac Edison Power Company filed an application in July on behalf of Allegheny Energy with the Maryland PSC to construct the power line and build the substation in Mount Airy. Kaplan is optimistic the application will be turned down.

The approximately 200-member group invited former PSC Chairman H. Russell Frisby Jr. to attend its August meeting so he could listen to opinions and educate members further on the PATH project. In an e-mail to Kaplan, Frisby respectfully denied the invitation, because of "the nature of the legal questions which you address in your Reply Brief in opposition to the PATH Application."

Members wrote down questions that are being mailed to Frisby's office for a response.

According to Kaplan, in 2007, PJM stated that there would be a critical need for the PATH when energy usage increased by 10 percent. PJM Interconnection, LLC, a Regional Transmission Organization that is part of the Eastern Interconnection grid, operates an electric transmission in 13 states and Washington, D.C., including Maryland. Its latest findings show a decrease in the need for

energy by 7.1 percent in the area to be serviced by the PATH project.

The Conservancy concludes that there is no longer a need for the PATH project due in large part to the downturn in the U.S. economy and a reduction in demand. "At this point, it is beyond burying the lines ... It is a down economy. We have plenty of time. Why rush it?" Kaplan asked.

If Frisby did attend the group's meeting, Kaplan said he would have brought up this very point. "Why do you think energy need is going to bounce back so quickly?" he said. "It just proves to me that the need just isn't there."

The latest U.S. Department of Energy forecast shows that a 10 percent increase in energy usage won't occur until 2025.

Tree farm owner and Conservancy member Barbara LaGarde Luchsinger, who runs Urbana's A Piece of Quiet Farm, said she faces enormous losses if the power line is constructed through her property.

Ten East Coast governors have written a letter to members of Congress opposing the construction of transmission lines that would bring power from the Midwest because these lines undermine local efforts to create renewable sources of power generation; Gov. Martin O'Malley is one of the governors who has signed the letter. "There is just not a need for it. Let the governments do what they need to do in each individual state," Kaplan said.

Kaplan is urging the federal government to stop pursuing the addition of transmission lines and explore other options, such as wind power.

Walkersville resident and Conservancy member Ron Mallonee wanted to ask Frisby about the use of wind power or alternative methods to power lines "It is not just a financial decision, but there are environmental concerns," he said. "I see them spending my money in a very inefficient way. Let's go back to the drawing board and craft a solution using wind and solar technology."

The Conservancy continues to support the use of HVDC underground technology for long distance transmission only when a need is shown. "It is wonderful technology, but only where it is truly needed. In our case, it would not address all of the issues," Kaplan said. "No one wants the lights to go off, but we have the time, let's do it right."

The Sugarloaf Conservancy will meet again on Saturday, September 19 at 10 a.m. at Urbana Library.