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Thursday, June 4, 2009

Opponents to PATH question necessity, compatibility with renewable energy plans

by Christian Brown | Staff Writer
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If you ask opponents of PATH why they don't like the proposed power line, they'll tell you it goes beyond not wanting it in their back yard.

PATH, or the Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline, is a proposed power line that could stretch from southern West Virginia to southern Frederick County. The proposal has created controversy in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia, the three states through which it will pass.

One local group that opposes PATH is the Sugarloaf Conservancy, based in southern Frederick.

Doug Kaplan, president of the Sugarloaf Conservancy, said that he does not believe PATH is compatible with the declared intentions of 10 East Coast governors, including Martin O'Malley (D), who are seeking federal incentives to create off-shore, wind-generated electricity. The East Coast is one of the richest areas for wind generation, and the governors of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, Delaware, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and Vermont have asked congressional leaders to support their efforts to create wind power projects in their states. Because PATH will be transmitting coal-powered electricity to Maryland, Kaplan believes that having it in place could stifle efforts to create a more ecologically-friendly solution to future power needs.

"[PATH is] detrimental to what the East Coast governors want to achieve," Kaplan said.

PJM Interconnection, a regional power grid operator that is directing the construction of PATH, produced a report in January that found that the recession was not likely to rebound until 2011 or 2012, which was one of the reasons PATH's schedule was delayed earlier this year. Originally, PJM had recommended that PATH be complete by 2012, but it has moved the recommended completion date back to 2014.

Representatives from both PJM and Allegheny Energy, one of the companies that will be building PATH, have said that they want the power line in place by the time the economy rebounds, so that they can meet electrical demand.

Kaplan disagreed, saying that because of the decreased need for electricity there is more time to study alternatives.

The conservancy planned to attend a Maryland Public Service Commission hearing Wednesday afternoon in Baltimore, where the commission was set to consider the application for PATH. Kaplan planned to present a letter in opposition to PATH, which asked the commission to deny the application.

There was also a demonstration near Harpers Ferry, W.Va. on Sunday, at which 40 people waved placards asking passing motorists on U.S. Route 340 to honk if they were against PATH.

Patience Wait, of Shepherdstown, W.Va., was one of the demonstration's organizers, and she said that most of the passing motorists were in support.

"Only about five people told us to get a real job," she said, laughing.



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Quoting a Wall Street Journal article from 2008, Wait said that electric companies are noticing a drop in power use that can not be easily explained by the recession, and may have began even earlier. Wait questioned that the need for new power lines existed at all, and said that PJM, Allegheny, and American Electric Power, the primary advocates of new power lines, would be the ones who would profit if they are built.

Wait said that though many people couch PATH's opponent's objections as being a "not-in-my-backyard" issue, she said her concerns go beyond that.

She said that should the lines be built, and then become obsolete because of newer, greener technology which could locally transmit power, such as offshore wind generation, then PATH would have been a waste of consumer's money, property, and the environment.

She admitted that she did begin objecting to PATH because one of its proposed routes was going to come through her house. However, she said that once Allegheny and American Electric Power removed that route, she continued to object.

"This was a bad idea when it was going to take my house, and it's still a bad idea when it's going to take someone else's house," Wait said.



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