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CITIZEN JOURNALISM: High-voltage opposition to a power plan

Nancy S. Williams SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Many Marylanders, Virginians and West Virginians are finding themselves in a real-life David-and-Goliath battle with American Electric Power Co. Inc. (AEP) and Allegheny Energy Inc. over the proposed PATH power line.

This is not your average power line, the residents opposed to it contend.

The power companies want to construct PATH (Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highline) with 765-kilovolt lines, the largest there is, and with towers as high as 200 feet, the size of a 20-story building. The project could cut a construction right-of-way swath as wide as 2,200 feet, according to the power companies' request to the West Virginia Public Service Commission.

The proposed line is to extend across three states for 275 miles. It would begin at the John E. Amos coal-fired power-plant substation in Putnam County, W.Va.; cut northeast through 13 West Virginia counties; and weave its way through Frederick and Loudoun counties in Virginia, Jefferson County in the West Virginia panhandle and Frederick County in Maryland before ending at a substation that is to be built near Mount Airy/Monrovia, Md.

According to the power companies' Web site, "PATH is needed to prevent significant overloads and voltage problems in the region." The companies also state in public meetings that PJM Interconnection LLC, the regional grid operator, has asked them to construct the line.

However, thousands of residents in all three states fiercely oppose the proposal, not convinced that "need" is the underlying motivation for the \$1.8 billion project.

Keryn Newman, a Shepherdstown, W.Va., resident, shared her take on the subject in a recent letter in the monthly Observer: "PATH is all about greed, not need. The 'need' claimed by PJM is manufactured. As with any math problem, the desired answer can be obtained by playing with

the numbers."

"In reality, PATH is not a sincere effort to strengthen America's power grid," said Kirsten Weiblen of Hampshire County, W.Va.

In Virginia, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors stated in a resolution of opposition against PATH: "The need for the PATH proposal remains unexamined and unanalyzed by credible independent experts as does a review of alternatives."

In West Virginia, more than 250 people have filed to be intervenors in the case against PATH. West Virginia Public Service Commission Chairman Michael A. Albert recently stated: "In thirty years, I have never seen anything like this," referring to the number of intervenors. Thousands have signed protest letters and petitions opposing the 200-mile section that would cut through their state.

Maryland residents have organized their opposition to PATH with the Sugarloaf Conservancy and CAKES (Citizens Against Kempton Electric Substation). On the CAKES Web site, opponents claim they are "determined to prevent the highest voltage electric substation ever built in the United States by Allegheny Energy" and note that "we are not alone in our opposition and this is a battle worth fighting."

The resolution from Loudoun County also says the proposal "raises public fears about health risks"

For example, some parents are fearful of the possible threat of childhood leukemia and other health risks being imposed upon their children from electric and magnetic fields (EMF) and extremely-low-frequency (ELF) radiation exposure from the power lines and substations. Marylanders say they are concerned that 1,300 homes, one children's center and two elementary schools are in close proximity to the proposed substation site, according to the CAKES Web site.

Jefferson County, W.Va., residents also are concerned about two of their schools being close to the line.

At a recent PATH information meeting in Sissonville, W.Va., Allegheny Energy's EMF expert, Bill Bailey, stated, "I would be more concerned about my child getting Lyme disease than being harmed by EMF exposure."

Opponents countered that they will be looking beyond the power company's experts for answers.

In his article "Do High Voltage Power Lines Cause Cancer," published in an April 1996 issue of *Midwest Today*, Neal Lawrence tells of a cluster of children from Omaha. One mother of a child with cancer noticed that there were several children at the local pool with hair loss and scars from operations. Once the parents started talking among themselves, they discovered that 11 children at that pool had two things in common: They all had had cancer, and they all lived within one mile of the same substation.

Most research that has been done on the cancer linkage has been inconclusive, but it was conducted on 400-kilovolt or smaller lines.

West Virginia resident Bill Howley has been researching the PATH proposal for more than a year. He keeps people informed on the topic through his blog, the Power Line at <http://calhounpowerline.wordpress.com>.

"I got involved with this when I realized what incomplete and misleading information the power companies were feeding the public. I wanted them to know the truth," Mr. Howley said.

In Loudoun County, residents voiced their opposition, pointing to what they contend is the adverse effect the line will have, especially in the historic areas of the gateways to Loudoun County and the town of Lovettsville, settled in 1732, according to the supervisors' resolution. They highly value the tourism industry in this historic region. PATH also crosses the popular C&O Canal, the Appalachian Trail and the Monongahela National Forest.

Property value loss, health issues, devastation of scenic landscapes, fragmentation of wildlife habitat, the use of dangerous herbicides for maintaining clear-cut areas, lack of need, the exploration of alternatives, and polluting of water sources are some of the issues raised by concerned residents in various public and online venues. They also have voiced caution that if the project is approved, it will lock into place for 50 or more years the older practice of producing electricity by coal-fired power plants

"There seems to be something un-American when average citizens, many of whom are living from paycheck to paycheck, are having to battle such a huge giant with lavish ad campaigns, endless funding, hired experts, huge law firms, and who will be making millions off of our loss and devastation," said John Cobb of Lewis County, W.Va. "And we ratepayers will be incurring their costs. It's fundamentally unjust that for-profit companies with millionaire CEOs can take or ruin our most valuable asset, our property, through eminent domain, and put our children's and grandchildren's health and well-being at risk. Those who will rake in millions on this deal won't have to worry about their children playing near the lines."

• *Nancy S. Williams is an educator and writer living Elkview, W.Va.*

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