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Town of Mount Airy officially opposes PATH plan

Letter to the Maryland Public Service Commission details concern over fires, toxins that transmission line could bring

by Angie Cochrun | Staff Writer

Members of the Mount Airy Planning and Zoning Commission agreed Monday night to draft a letter to the Maryland Public Service Commission to restate their opposition to electric substation slated for eastern Frederick County.

Town staff already sent a letter to the Frederick County Board of Appeals in November requesting the refusal The Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline (PATH), but is again making plans for another missive as the project hangs in limbo.

"We're making sure that we do it within the right format so it gets accepted by them [the Public Service Commission]," said Mount Airy town planner Kelly Ziad.

The town is involved because of the substation's proximity to Mount Airy.

In 2008 Allegheny Energy started to seek a special exception to place an electrical substation in an agricultural zone on eastern Frederick County.

PATH is a proposed high-voltage power line calling for one continuous 765-kilovolt line from Amos, W.Va., to a proposed substation in Kemptown, located southwest of Mount Airy.

The power line and associated substations are expected to cost \$2.1 billion, and would bring electricity from a coal-fired power station in southeastern West Virginia to population centers to its east.

Ziad said the company, Allegheny Energy, has been going through both the county and the state to cover all the bases by following both processes. The project has gone as far as it can in Frederick County and is moving onto the state agency.

"There's some question as to who has authority to give this project approval," Ziad said, in a phone interview.

The first letter, sent to the Frederick County Board of Zoning Appeals who was handling the case last fall, cited concerns of potential fires, fire and rescue services strain, toxic plumes, and how the substation would fit into the Frederick County Comprehensive Plan and the New Market Region Plan.

"We feel it will have some negative impact," Ziad said.

After discussing the issue during their September and October meetings, the town's planning commission submitted the letter in November detailing their concerns. "We urge you to consider not allowing this site so close to the town and suggest it be located considerably further away in a remote location," the letter states.

PATH is a joint venture of Allegheny and American Electric Power, and both companies maintain the multi-state power line is necessary to maintain reliable electric service in the region.

Doug Colafella, a spokesman for Allegheny Energy, said the substation is just part of the overall project where a new line would tie into existing transmission lines, bringing greater electric capacity into the region to support previous growth.

The project is opposed by several local groups who have cited health, environmental and aesthetic issues with the project.

The Frederick County Board of Zoning Appeals voted against the project, then again on Dec. 20 to deny a request for reconsideration on the PATH project.

The town isn't the only one planning to let the Public Service Commission know their stance through a missive.

The Frederick Board of County Commissioners voted Jan. 25 to also send a letter to the Maryland Public Service Commission supporting the decisions by the board of zoning appeals and the planning commission.

"After considering the proposed PATH transmission line, the Planning Commission found the proposed line to be inconsistent with the Frederick County Comprehensive Plan," the letter states, adding that the board members take their responsibilities very seriously. "While decisions may not always be what applicants seek, our processes are fair and in accord with Maryland law."

Colafella said the Kemptown facility is part of an application currently before the Maryland Public Service Commission. "Right now they're slated to have a decision before the end of the year," he said. But, the company recently requested for the commission to extend the proceeding until early 2012 to have time to look at additional information.

"They haven't ruled on that request yet," he said.

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