

Friday, Aug. 28, 2009

Multistate power project faces resistance

About 1,300 homes in Frederick County suburb would have view of substation

by Christian Brown | Staff Writer

FREDERICK — Dick Ishler, a Mount Airy real estate agent, was unconcerned at first that a major power line would come to Frederick County. The location listed was Kempton, a few miles from his suburban neighborhood.

However, Kempton, with towers 100 and 150 feet tall and a substation the size of a high school, was less than a mile from his home.

"Virtually every house" in the community will be able to see the substation, Ishler said.

One of the companies proposing the power line, Allegheny Power, raised balloons to show the height of the structure this month, and to show how it could be hidden with plantings and earthworks. It did little to settle his fears.

Mount Airy resident Bob McLearen is uneasy with the prospect that the 50-acre substation might be visible from his house.

McLearen's is one of about 1,300 homes that would share a view of the substation.

"It makes no sense," McLearen said.

To proponents, the Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highline, is needed for the region's quality of life.

PATH would cross 275 miles and cost \$1.8 billion, delivering electricity from a coal-fired power station in southeastern West Virginia to population centers east. Allegheny Energy, based in Pittsburgh, and its partner American Electric Power, based in Columbus, Ohio, is asking the Maryland Public Service Commission for the permits necessary to build the line.

About 20 miles, or about one-fourteenth of the power line, will be in Maryland.

Proponents say energy use in the region has outgrown electrical infrastructure. They warn that by 2014, if more power lines are not built, the region could face blackouts in summer months when demand is high.

PATH will serve much of Maryland and the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where demand is high, according to H. Russell Frisby Jr., former PSC chairman and founding chairman of the Baltimore City Chamber of Commerce and a spokesman for the PATH Education and Awareness Team.

But because of the way the power grid distributes electricity, PATH power will supply other states. Opponents have balked that Maryland residents would have to support electricity needs elsewhere, especially because Allegheny is proposing a monthly 68-cent addition to its customers' bills.

Frisby said most of the power from PATH will benefit the states through which it runs.

"Maryland is going to be a major beneficiary of the power," he said.

PATH requires towers between 100 and 150 feet tall carrying 765 kilovolts to be placed along the route. The line will terminate at a substation to be built on farmland near 1,300 homes.

The 765-kV power lines are more efficient than those used in the past, saving tons of coal. PEAT cites a U.S.

Climate Technology Cooperation study that claims the lines will save 200,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions, the equivalent of the annual emissions from 55,000 cars.

In addition to Maryland's approval, the line must also get blessings from regulators in Virginia and West Virginia.

The Maryland PSC has a year to consider the request for a certificate of public convenience and necessity, which is the permit to build PATH, before the company can take its proposal before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Several residents of southeastern Frederick County have filed as interveners in the case, including the Sugarloaf Conservancy, which is concerned with preserving the rural landscape around Sugarloaf Mountain, and Citizens Against the Kemptown Electric Substation, or CAKES. Opponents have enlisted the aid of the Sierra Club.

In its deliberations, the PSC has to decide on the corporate makeup of the proposal. The PSC only can grant the right to build the line to a Maryland electric company, so Allegheny has transferred rights to its subsidiary Potomac Edison, of Hagerstown.

The PSC also must decide whether the company must get approvals from Frederick County government before the certificate is issued.

And the commission could allow the citizens' groups the right to request documents from the company and other agencies in the case.

In Maryland, the line would require the construction of a 50-acre substation near Mount Airy. Residents have organized to oppose the project at the Maryland Public Service Commission citing less electrical need because of the recession and the possible environmental damage constructing the line would cause.

McLearen and the other CAKES members took their case to the PSC, concerned about losses to property values and the possible health dangers.

They cited studies that suggest electromagnetic field radiation from power lines are linked to childhood leukemia and Alzheimer's disease.

CAKES member Ginny MacColl is not convinced by PATH's proponents' assertions that EMF poses no dangers. If residents discover health problems in the future, all the guarantees from PATH's builders would be meaningless, she said.

"I don't want us to look back 10 years from now and say 'I was against this, but I couldn't stop it,'" said McColl, who is Ishler's wife.