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PATH meeting goes on despite lack of guest speaker

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By [Ed Waters Jr.](#)

The Sugarloaf Conservancy held an informational meeting on Saturday, but one chair at the main table was empty.

About 20 people turned out for the event, held at the Urbana Regional Library.

The empty seat was for Russell Frisby, director of the PATH Education and Awareness Team (PEAT). A former chairman of the Maryland Public Service Commission, Frisby now works for Allegheny Energy, heading its program to educate consumers on the need for increased electrical service in the region.

In a letter to Frisby, Douglas Kaplan, president of Sugarloaf Conservancy, said members of his group "are open minded and would be interested in listening to your opinions and being educated by the PEAT team."

Kaplan's letter said that the invitation to Frisby was "personal" and that "as a former chairman of the PSC, you would want to hear our opinions as well as educate our membership. Our request for you to speak was presented in an effort to reach out and hear other points of view."

Frisby, in a letter to Kaplan, said that because Sugarloaf Conservancy "had petitioned to intervene in the PATH proceeding and the nature of the legal questions which you address in your reply brief in opposition to the PATH application, I do not believe that it would be appropriate for me to address the group at this time."

The Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highline is a nearly 300-mile, \$1.8 billion project between Allegheny Energy and American Electric Power that would bring power lines from West Virginia through Virginia and Maryland, ending at a proposed substation near Mount Airy, known as the Kemptown substation.

"I know we would have had more people here if Mr. Frisby had accepted our invitation," Kaplan said.

The group, along with CAKES (Citizens Against the Kemptown Electric Substation), are opposing the transmission line on various issues.

Kaplan noted that the PSC has yet to rule on whether the utility company can apply for the project under the name Potomac Edison. Although a legal name still in use for the utility company, Potomac Edison has no office, no employees and no equipment. PSC members questioned why Allegheny Power did not file the project under its own name or that of PATH Allegheny, set up to coordinate the project. Lawyers for the utility company said there were financial reasons for the name chosen. About 60 members of Sugarloaf Conservancy and CAKES attended the hearing on that in late July.

"I think the PSC will turn it down," Kaplan said, but added that "it is only one battle, not the war."

The groups have opposed the lines and substation based on many issues from environmental to health to whether it is even necessary.



Photo by Travis Pratt

Peggy and Douglas Kaplan of Sugarloaf Conservancy talk with audience members on Saturday. The meeting included an invitation to an Allegheny Energy spokesman, but that invitation was declined. About 20 residents came to the meeting at the Urbana Regional Library.

ON THE WEB

Sugarloaf Conservancy

www.sugarloafconservancy.org

Citizens Against Kemptown Electric Substation

www.nokemptonsubstation.org

The Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline

www.pathtransmission.com

"We also heard that the 7th Circuit Court ruled that if consumers don't benefit from a power line project, they should not have to pay for its construction," Kaplan said. That could affect potential ratepayers in the region. No decision was reached because the court pushed that issue back to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which will have much of the final say on the project. "We've been told that Maryland will only get 14 percent of the power generated by PATH," Kaplan said.

One of the aspects championed by Kaplan is that there is no near-future need for the power. He said U.S. Department of Energy figures on estimated electrical use increases are much lower than asserted by the utility company. The two groups are also questioning the proposed location of a large substation at a site surrounded by 1,200 homes. A fire or other emergency at the substation could mean everything from fire damage to pollution of groundwater sources, the groups said.

Kristin Madden of CAKES questioned why there are no independent studies of the project. Some questioned why an industrial area, such as the Alcoa Eastalco Works land near Buckeystown, wouldn't have been a more likely place for a substation. Allegheny Energy has said the site off Bartholows Road and Cowmans Manor Drive was chosen because it is where power lines from several utility companies come together.

One audience member noted that in the past, people have opposed nuclear and other power plants in the region that might have changed the need for such lines.

Peggy Kaplan, a member of Sugarloaf Conservancy, said residents should not give up. "We are proud of being NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard). Allegheny wants us to think we don't have a chance. But Americans have always fought for their rights, their land and that's what we are doing."

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