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Thursday, Sept. 30, 2010

PATH special exception meeting draws dozens of protesters

Wednesday's hearing runs late into night; will continue at a later date

by Tripp Laino | Staff Writer



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Despite a hearing that stretched long into the night, no decision was reached by the Frederick County Board of Zoning Appeals on a special exemption for the proposed PATH substation Wednesday.

Allegheny Energy is seeking a special exception to place the PATH (Potomac Appalachian Transmission Highline) substation in an area not zoned for its use, and is opposed by several groups, including Citizens Against Kemptown Energy Substation (CAKES), who have yet to testify.

Allegheny brought seven expert witnesses to testify on aspects of the substation that were of public concern, such as whether the substation qualifies as a carcinogen, the amount of electro-magnetic frequency it generates and the noise that it will create during operation.

The substation has already hit several roadblocks in the county. At a meeting on Sept. 15, the Frederick County Planning and Zoning Commission voted unanimously to reject the PATH substation because it is not consistent with the county's comprehensive plan.

The PATH is a proposed high-voltage power line that originally called for a 765-kilovolt line from Amos, W.Va., to Beddington, W.Va., and twin 500-kilovolt lines that would have connected to a proposed substation in Kemptown, located southwest of Mount Airy.

During the course of planning since 2008, the company decided to only construct one continuous 765-kilovolt line from Amos to Kemptown, eliminating the connection with the Beddington substation. Allegheny was forced to change its plans because it was unable to find a route through several communities in Berkeley County, W.Va.

PATH will serve PJM Interconnection, a regional organization that coordinates power transmission in 13 states and Washington, D.C. PJM initially projected the transmission line would be needed by 2012 to prevent grid failure, but has moved back the deadline date to 2014.

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. Allegheny's expected portion of those costs is expected to be about \$1.4 billion, according to information from the PATH website.

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The cost of the power line would be distributed among rate payers throughout PJM's service area, with Maryland residents expecting to see an increase of 85 cents per month on their bill.

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

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Extended cross examination from residents prevented all of Allegheny's experts from testifying Wednesday. Three of their witnesses have yet to testify.

Richard Peppin, who was brought by Allegheny in to testify about the noise of the substation, said the site should meet the county's standards for decibel levels. He said the site should have a decibel level of 33 to 43 decibels at the property limits, lower than the county's limit of 55 decibels at night. The level of conversation at a dinner table is approximately 65 decibels, he said. Peppin said the noise from the station stops being noticeable once it reaches the decibel level of the background noise.

"If you could imagine it was a city, rather than a rural community, you wouldn't hear it after a few feet," Peppin said. "In a rural community, it's going to propagate far, until it meets the background noise, let's say cars or trucks or crickets. It's hard to say the distance because of the background noise."

The substation will also have very little effect in terms of electro-magnetic frequency, according to Michael Silva, Allegheny's witness. He said the dissipation of the frequency changes based on the size of the object, and that the more distance between the object in the reading, the lower the frequency.

"By putting that in the middle of the property, you don't see much as you get to the property line," Silva said. "If you wanted to have low EMF, and you came to me and asked for low EMF, that's one way to do it."

The hearing will continue at a later date, but it has not yet been scheduled.

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