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Urbana Civic Association provides podium for concerns

by Christian Brown | Staff Writer

Ask Linda Ropelewski what the Urbana Civic Association stands for, and she'll probably tell you that members are concerned about who's building what and where.

"I consider us kind of the watchdogs," said Ropelewski, president of the association.

The association is made up of residents who want to maintain the historic character of the older parts of Urbana.

On Jan. 20, the association held its annual meeting, electing a new board of directors and officers for 2010: Ropelewski, president; Sue Waterman, vice president; Howard Spicer, treasurer; and Barbara Taylor, secretary.

The board of directors consists of Tracy Barss, Janine Barofka, Heather Eckert, Jodie Farless, Debbie Flook, Barbara Luchsinger, John McClurkin, Dawson Moon, Joe Reid and Jean Wood.

The group continues to act as a "watchdog" for development in Urbana, and is always looking for new members to become involved to weigh in on issues such as school over-crowding and residential and commercial development.

But Ropelewski said the most pressing issue facing the association is the Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline (PATH), a proposed 275-mile power line that would stretch from southern West Virginia to southern Frederick County.

The line is a joint project of Allegheny Energy and American Electric Power, which the companies say will be necessary to keep the electrical grid reliable in the future.

On Jan. 20, the association invited representatives of three groups; The Sugarloaf Conservancy, the Citizens Against the Kempton Substation and the Maryland chapter of the Sierra Club to speak about PATH. The groups have opposed PATH on the grounds that it could damage the environment, and negatively affect health and property values if it is constructed near homes.

Chad Baker, a member of the association, said that representatives of the PATH Education and Awareness Team, which has been attempting to drum up local support for the power line, were invited to the event, but declined.

The multi-state power line, which would pass through West Virginia, Virginia and end in Maryland, would bring electricity from a coal-fired power plant into the region's power grid.

Members of the groups who spoke at the association's meeting on Jan. 20 said PATH would provide little benefit to Maryland residents, who would have to put up with power lines and a proposed large scale substation near their properties.

Peggy Kaplan, a member of the Sugarloaf Conservancy, said that she had taken a fluorescent light, which she brought with her as a prop, out near some 500-kilovolt lines near Urbana at night, and it lit up without being plugged in.

She said that this fact worries her about the effect the electromagnetic radiation from PATH might have on the health of those living near it.

"What else is it [electromagnetic field] doing that I don't know about?" she asked rhetorically.

In its most recent filing with the Maryland Public Service Commission, PATH included testimony from medical doctors and other experts who said that the level of electromagnetic radiation produced by the power line would not harm people.

But David O'Leary, conservation chair of the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club, said that the problem goes beyond Urbana.

He said Marylanders are becoming wary of electricity generated using "dirty coal," but whether or not Maryland chooses to build alternative energy sources such as coastal wind power, the state is still getting power through the electrical grid from coal plants in other states.

"That's not fair to people who live there," O'Leary said.

He said that finding new ways to use less power would not only be better for the environment, but save money in the long run.

"It makes sense [to be energy efficient] whether you believe in global warming or not," O'Leary said.

Ropelewski said the group would continue to provide a forum for local issues, including candidate forums later this year. She said that the most important thing that the club can do is get information on pressing issues out to the people of Urbana.

"We're doing far more for the community by presenting a podium," Ropelewski said.

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The Urbana Civic Association meets at 7 p.m. on the third Monday of each month at Urbana Regional Library. Call Linda Ropelewski at 301-663-3182.