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PATH applications withdrawn in three states; opponents elated

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A massive transmission line project -- the subject of controversy, lengthy meetings and changing timelines -- will be shelved through 2011.

PJM Interconnection, which coordinates and directs operations for electric power needs in 13 states and the District of Columbia, said Monday it is suspending the 275-mile, \$2.1 billion Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline project from its 2011 Regional Transmission Expansion Plan.

"Recent dramatic swings in economic forecasts and evolving public policies, particularly with respect to renewable energy, are adding greater uncertainty to our planning studies," PJM President and CEO Terry Boston said in a prepared statement.

The statement said, however, that the region's electricity system faces more challenges in the next 10 years than any other period over the last 100.

"This action," the PJM statement said, "does not, at this time, constitute a directive by PJM to sponsoring transmission owners to cancel or abandon the PATH project."

FirstEnergy and American Electric Power, partners in PATH, are withdrawing applications in West Virginia and Virginia. On Monday, the application was withdrawn in Maryland. A letter from FirstEnergy's attorney stated that PJM's latest analysis shows the predicted need for future energy PATH would have provided is now further in the future.

In its joint response, FirstEnergy and American Electric Power said that PJM had directed the construction of PATH in 2007 because of anticipated power needs in the region.

"Since then, annual studies have reaffirmed the need for PATH as the recommended solution for resolving these issues," the report said.

The companies will immediately suspend activities on the project, except those that may be necessary to return the project to active status at the conclusion of PJM's planning process review, the statement said.

Opponents celebrate

For residents along the proposed route of PATH -- especially those living near where the PATH line would have ended in a huge electric substation near Bartholows Road -- the suspension was good news.

Sugarloaf Conservancy President Doug Kaplan said his group didn't initially oppose the transmission plan, wanting instead underground wiring or alternative routes. But, Kaplan said, as the organization scrutinized the plan, they saw growing differences between forecasts by PJM and the Department of Energy on the region's need for power.

"We are heartened to hear that PATH will withdraw its applications," Kaplan said.

Kaplan said PJM should reconsider as an alternative updating the transmission line from Mount Storm, in West Virginia, to Doubs in Frederick County, as well as wind power and other renewable energy sources.

Another opposition group is Citizens Against the Kemptown Electric Substation, or CAKES, made up primarily of the residents in some 1,300 houses close to the proposed substation near Mount Airy.

"This is but the latest example of David beating Goliath, concerned citizens banding together, in this case, to stop a toxic fired transmission line," President Dick Ishler said.

Delegate Kelly Schulz, who serves in the Maryland General Assembly on the House Economic Matters Committee, welcomed news of PATH's postponement and called for more scrutiny of the substation's location.

"I have done a great deal of research over the past several months and have listened to arguments on both sides of the issue," Schulz said. "I have come to the conclusion that, at the very least, a more extensive review needs to be

conducted on the chosen location of the site."

John Armand, who lives near the proposed substation site, said by e-mail that the utility companies should scrap the PATH project. Future projects focus on renewable energy, he said. Armand and other opponents voiced concern at meetings in Frederick and Baltimore about the negative impact of the substation on the environmental, aesthetics, safety and value of residents' properties.

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