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PATH opponents elated by halted plan

Controversial power line would cut through southern Frederick County

by Tripp Laino | Staff Writer

Residents opposed to PATH are rejoicing after plans for its implementation have been halted.

PJM Interconnection, the regional grid operator that coordinates power transmission in 13 states and Washington, D.C., has halted plans to go forward with the Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline project. The controversial 275-mile, high-power electric line that would cut through southern Frederick County and end in Kemptown has been put on hold so the regional grid operator can better analyze future needs.

As a result, the companies behind PATH — FirstEnergy, which last week merged with Allegheny Power, and American Electric Power, both of Ohio — withdrew applications for the project from Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia.

The withdrawal brings praise from at least one group in opposition to the project, which includes Citizens Against Kemptown Electrical Substation, the Sierra Club and the Sugarloaf Conservancy. Doug Kaplan, the president of the Sugarloaf Conservancy, said it was vindicating to hear PJM admitted having trouble forecasting need, as his group had contended.

"It's not just a few years, several years out, it's more like 2020 and beyond," Kaplan said. "The satisfying thing is they even finally admitted that they were having trouble doing forecasting. They blamed it on the change and demand response. ... The old formulas don't work and they need to do new modeling."

Kaplan said he and the other members of the conservancy were happy their battle over the PATH project has come to an end.

"We're very happy that what we have said is confirmed," he said. "We're relieved that we'll now be able to get our lives back together. It's been a very long two-and-a-half years. ... We're very glad to move on with our lives, and we hope that other people won't have to face a similar issue."

PATH has been in the planning stages for years to serve PJM Interconnection. PJM initially projected the transmission line would be needed by 2012 to prevent grid failure, and later moved back the deadline to 2015.

On Monday, PJM released a statement from Terry Boston, the company's president and CEO, saying several factors are causing it to re-analyze its future needs, including the sluggish economy, decreased demand and the growing calls and policies for renewable energy.

The release reads, in part, "a set of new and greater uncertainties — not just with load growth estimates but also other key indicators relevant to planning assessments — are complicating the analysis of future reliability needs."

The release also states the project's hold does not mean that it will be canceled or abandoned, and that PJM will review the project as part of its 2011 regional transmission expansion plan.

Todd Meyers, a spokesman for FirstEnergy, said the area's electrical needs are going to continue to grow, even if not at the same rate as original estimates. He said there would continue to be evaluations on the electric needs, even as they halt the PATH project.

"We're backing off on many of the activities that would keep the project up in its current state," Meyers said.

"But the work that's been done isn't lost. There's no doubt that there's going to be some substantial investment needed to the electric infrastructure going forward. Even if it's at a slower rate, there's always growth."

He said he wasn't sure what the next step in supplying power needs would be for the area, but that any further update would come from PJM.

"They're in the catbird seat; they look over the entire regional grid," Meyers said. "They decide what upgrade or what new project needs to be built. ...This was built at the behest of PJM. We rely on PJM to determine what upgrades are necessary for the grid. It's a very thorough and dynamic planning process that they do."

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