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Information sessions on LNG pipeline

Federal officials to meet with property owners about route

By Laura Barnhardt

Sun reporter

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If the proposed liquefied natural gas pipeline from eastern Baltimore County to Pennsylvania is approved, Mike and Pat Liberatore face two daunting possibilities.

Under one scenario, the Harford County couple could lose most of the trees on their property. Under the other, they say, the LNG pipeline could come through their bedroom.

The kicker? "We can't get our home connected for natural gas," says Mike Liberatore, a builder who has lived in the Street area for 13 years. "We won't see the benefits of this."

As the deadline nears for federal regulators to decide whether to approve the project - which includes building an LNG terminal in Sparrows Point - a last-minute round of public meetings has been scheduled to provide details about the proposed pipeline and give residents such as the Liberatores more information about potential effects of the construction.

A meeting scheduled for today in Lancaster County, Pa., was requested by Rep. Joe Pitts, a Pennsylvania Republican whose district includes that county and parts of the westernmost suburbs of Philadelphia.

Staff from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission - which ultimately decides where LNG plants and pipelines are built - will also meet with property owners along the proposed pipeline today through Thursday as they review route alternatives.

The final FERC staff report on the project is scheduled to be released Friday, but it could be delayed by the additional meetings, according to an agency spokeswoman.

A vote on the project by the five-member commission is planned for late November.

Under the plan by Arlington, Va.-based AES Corp., the LNG terminal would be built on the former Bethlehem Steel shipyard on Sparrows Point. Overseas tankers would deliver the liquid fuel, which would be returned to its gaseous state at the facility in Dundalk.

The product would then be pumped through the pipeline to Eagle, Pa., where three interstate natural gas pipelines converge within a mile of one another. There, the gas would enter existing pipelines connected to smaller gas lines that serve homes and businesses.

By increasing the natural gas supply in the region, prices for gas customers should drop, said Richard Hoffmann, executive director of the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America Foundation.

Logistically, the pipeline is necessary, he said: "Sites like Sparrows Point are few and far between."

Maryland union leaders have long supported the project because of the jobs it would create, including 50 permanent jobs and 375 temporary construction positions.

But when AES announced its plans two years ago, the project was met with almost instant opposition by community leaders and elected officials, concerned about the possible environmental damage and about the safety of the facility and pipeline.

"It's just a bad idea," said Carolyn Jones, president of the Greater Dundalk Alliance and co-founder of the LNG Opposition Team.

Whether the residents live near the proposed plant or the pipeline, she said, "It's devastating to the environment, no matter which way you look at it."

But a string of regulatory decisions has gone in favor of AES in recent months.

In July, officials of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development calculated that the plant would be far enough away from HUD projects to meet standards.

In June, the U.S. secretary of commerce decided to override the state's objections to the project that had been based on a finding that the LNG project would conflict with the state's coastal zone management plan.

Maryland officials are waiting until after the final FERC report is released this month before deciding whether to appeal the Commerce Department's decision in U.S. District Court, according to a spokesman for Gov. Martin O'Malley.

This month, Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. said the county would ask the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a federal appellate ruling in May that the county overstepped its authority by creating zoning regulations that would have made it easier to stop the project.

Two of the three public hearings held in June about the LNG project took place in communities not far from the pipeline. And public notices were mailed to property owners, according to FERC.

But some of the intended recipients have told officials that they did not receive the mailings and were caught off-guard by the plans.

An official with the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland wrote to FERC this summer saying the organization was unaware of the proposed pipeline, which would cross through its 600-acre Camp Conowingo in Cecil County, according to FERC filings.

Pitts asked for the additional FERC hearing to give people more information about the project, his spokesman, Andrew Cole, said.

"Some people don't like the idea of a pipeline going through their backyard," Cole said. "Just as much, we're hearing concern from constituents because they can't get information."

Some specifics about the pipeline route are classified because they contain information that would be considered proprietary to businesses or other details, such as the location of valves, considered to be critical to the nation's energy infrastructure, said FERC spokeswoman Tamara Young-Allen.

In all, the proposed pipeline would come within 50 feet of 179 houses. According to AES's filings with FERC, the company does not anticipate that any houses or buildings would have to be razed for the pipeline.

But the Liberators worry because the route has not been finalized and because AES would receive eminent domain authority - the power to take private property for public use - if the pipeline is approved by the federal commission.

The pipeline is expected to cross the properties of several schools in Fallston and come within a quarter-mile of several Middle River schools, in addition to dozens of churches and parks, including Rocks State Park.

Much of the new pipeline would run near existing gas pipelines. The new one for the LNG, though, would be larger.

And while residents might not give much thought to a buried pipeline, some residents are upset about the disruption that would be caused by the construction and worry about the safety of locating a new pipeline close to existing ones.

AES has said it can safely operate the shipping terminal and the pipeline.

The company did not respond to requests for more information.

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PIPELINE INFORMATION

Today's meeting on the proposed pipeline will be held at 7 p.m. at Octorara High School, 226 Highland Road, Atglen, Pa.

The FERC staff will meet with those interested in touring the proposed pipeline route at 2 p.m. today at the Fallston Recreation Complex, 1809 Fallston Road.

- 9 a.m. tomorrow at the park office at Nottingham County Park, 150 Park Road, Nottingham, Pa.
- 8:30 a.m. Thursday in the parking lot across from the the Halliburton office building, 710 Stockton Drive, Exton, Pa.
- 2:30 p.m. Thursday in the parking lot at Broad Run Park, behind West Bradford Elementary School, 1495 Broad Run Road, Downingtown, Pa.

More information: FERC Office of External Affairs at 866-208-FERC, or go to www.mid-atlanticexpress.com and <http://elibrary.ferc.gov/idmws/search/fercadvsearch.asp>. Enter docket number: cp07-62.

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