

Proposed pipeline draws opposition

Rod Mackler, chair of the C&O Canal Association's environmental committee, attended a public hearing in Hancock December 19, concerning the proposed natural gas pipeline there. He provided this report:

The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) held a long and contentious hearing on the proposed natural gas pipeline under the C&O Canal NHP, December 19, at the Hancock Middle/High School, according to reports in the *Hagerstown Herald-Mail*, the *Morgan Messenger*, and *Frederick News-Post*. Several hundred people attended, and the meeting had to be called after three hours, with 25 people inscribed on the agenda who had not gotten a chance to speak. The hearing will be continued January 18 at MDE offices in Baltimore.

The purpose of the hearing was to get input into the decision whether to grant a permit for the TransCanada Company to build a pipeline to cross the state's non-tidal wetlands and waterways. TransCanada wants to build the pipeline to carry fracked gas from Pennsylvania, across three miles of Maryland just west of Hancock, and into West Virginia.

Other than the spokesman for TransCanada, only five people spoke in favor of the pipeline: a two members of the West Virginia legislature, the economic development director for Morgan County, West Virginia, and two members of the labor union that would supply workers to build the pipeline. The representative from TransCanada highlighted his company's safety record for gas pipelines, as opposed to its disastrous record with oil pipelines.

Elected officials were offered the first opportunity to speak. No Hancock or Washington County officials took up the offer. (The city of Hancock has already sold a permanent easement for the pipeline across land it owns, for \$1,680.) A Councilwoman from Boonsboro presented a letter from her council asking MDE to deny the permit.

Most of the 80 speakers on the list were opposed to the pipeline. They cited economic, environmental, and policy reasons for their stance. There is no compelling economic reason to build the pipeline, they argued, since the West Virginia panhandle already has access to natural gas. Most cited the pollution threat to the river, which supplies drinking water to over six million people. Local residents also feared pollution of well water. On the policy side, they held, the state of Maryland has banned the practice of fracking, and should not encourage it elsewhere by allowing this gas to transit the state.

The pipeline is to be built using horizontal drilling; TransCanada claims it would run 100 feet under the Park and maintains it would not require the felling of trees or destruction of wetlands within the C&O Canal NHP. The Park feels that opposition to the pipeline would be futile, given the Park's enabling legislation limits its ability to restrict such projects.

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