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PSE&G offering money to towns along proposed power line route

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Towns along the proposed Susquehanna-Roseland power line upgrade project have until the end of the day to decide whether to accept money offered by Public Service Electric and Gas Co. in the waning days before a decision by the state Board of Public Utilities is expected.

PSE&G last week made settlement offers to the 16 municipalities through which the 500-kilovolt lines — on towers as tall as 195 feet — would cross. The contact offered to one municipality indicates the money is meant to cover costs associated with construction, but some opponents feel it is a political payoff.

"It's an attempt for PSE&G to try and make it appear as if municipalities are okay with the project, they just have to buy them off to do that," said Julia Somers, executive director at the NJ Highland Coalition.

Karen Johnson, a PSE&G spokeswoman, did not specify the total of the settlements, but said each municipality received an offer based on a formula it developed tied to reimbursements for emergency preparedness and safety, the planting of vegetation and construction impacts.

"We are in confidential settlement discussions with the towns along the route," Johnson said. "We recognize that there would be impacts on these towns during the construction of the project and developed a formula to take that into account."

The Jefferson council last Tuesday received an offer of \$398,000 and has scheduled a special meeting tonight at 6 p.m. to vote on a resolution to accept the funds, which are contingent on the project's approval. Of that amount, \$200,000 would be paid to the township to mitigate the potential impact to residents along the right of way, \$48,480 for the planting of trees or brush and \$150,000 for electrical fire safety equipment and training for rescue squads, according to a copy of the agreement provided by officials.

Kinnelon and Boonton Township received offers Friday, for \$154,641 and about \$60,000, respectively, officials said. Neither municipality has placed the matter on upcoming agendas to be reviewed by governing bodies.

Rockaway Township administrator Greg Poff confirmed PSE&G made an offer, but declined to specify the amount, citing attorney-client privilege, while officials in Montville, Parsippany and East Hanover did not return calls from the Daily Record. The three latter municipalities — in addition to Sussex County towns Andover, Byram, Fredon and Hardwick — are registered interveners in the process before the BPU.

The contract received by Jefferson stipulates that the settlement agreement waives all rights to oppose the project in court or any other forum and is not "intended to address or resolve any claims that the municipality or its residents may have against PSE&G with respect to damage to their real or personal property caused by construction of the project."

Scott Olson, a councilman in Byram Township, said the council there received PSE&G's settlement contract just before its public meeting last Monday. The matter was discussed in closed session, but no decision was reached, he said.

"It would be irresponsible for us to not consider this," Olson said. "But, personally, I don't think there is anything they (PSE&G) can do to change my mind. I think the project is wrong."

Dave Slaperud, trustee of Stop the Lines, said the settlement offers "seem like a desperation move" by PSE&G.

"The items mentioned in the proposed agreement are all things that PSE&G should be willing to do, if the project somehow gets approved," Slaperud said. "It doesn't make sense they would be trying to settle with towns that are not part of the lawsuit process."

The deal to approve PSE&G's settlement contract is not yet a done deal in Jefferson, said Rick Yochum, council president.

"I'm opposed to accepting the funds on a matter of principal," Yochum said. "Seven days to make such an important decision is unheard of in municipal government. It may be a tough budget year, but my hope is the entire project is withdrawn."

It is unclear when the BPU will rule on the \$750 million project that would traverse 47 miles in New Jersey. It has asked PSE&G and the municipalities and environmental groups that oppose the plan to submit comment about PATH Allegheny Virginia Transmission Corp's decision to withdraw its application for a major mid-Atlantic power line after a study there showed a declining demand for energy.

It will determine after Friday whether that decision will be considered alongside the Susquehanna-Roseland proposal.

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