

Groups are unified against the utilities' new power line

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STAFF WRITER

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A unity event last month at the Portland-to-Columbia footbridge drew more than 80 people, residents and environmentalists, opposed to a proposed 146-mile power line expansion. The location near national park land at a juncture linking New Jersey and Pennsylvania perfectly represented all three of the major players in the massive power project.

At the rally, those opposed to the project spoke and listened, clapped and nodded, and marched as one across the pedestrian span over the Delaware River, united in their beliefs.

"This is a rally to support the 'no action/no build' alternative for the Susquehanna-Roseland transmission line. The utilities have tried to divide NJ and PA to push this unnecessary project forward. We will not be divided. We are united!" said Christine Guhl a spokeswoman for the NJ Chapter of the Sierra Club.

The "no action/no build" option is one of many possible alternatives being considered by the National Park Service (NPS) as it prepares the federally required environmental impact study on the project.

In fact the only reason that the utility companies don't have shovels in the ground already is the requirement for NPS approval.

The Boards of Public Utilities in both states already have approved the plan to carry Pennsylvania coal from the source in Berwick along an existing right-of-way that cuts through the national park, the Appalachian Trail and into New Jersey where the line, known as Route B, enters Hardwick Township in Warren County and continues through Sussex and Morris counties before ending in Roseland in Essex County. Locally the lines will pass through Jefferson, Kinnelon, Rockaway Township, Parsippany, East Hanover and Montville.

Public Service Electric & Gas (PSE&G) in New Jersey and PPL Electric Utilities Corporation in Pennsylvania devised the project that would skyrocket the existing 80-foot towers up to almost 200 feet in some areas. The additional tower height will accommodate a growth in current capacity from 230 kilovolts to 500 kilovolts.

Many environmentalist dispute the need for the line, pointing out that demand has been down for the past three years. However, PJM Interconnect, which operates the power grid in 13 states, has predicated brownouts and blackouts by 2012 if the system that was built in the 1920s is not upgraded.

"Reliability is paramount. It is the goal and the driving force for everything we do at PJM. To meet our reliability responsibilities, we need to get new major transmission facilities built," said Terry Boston, PJM president and chief executive officer.

For those environmentalists and many residents, the question is, at what cost?

At the public comment sessions, hundreds of people in towns that will host the lines voiced their concerns. Residents lamented the effects of the high-voltage power on health and property values, environmentalists are calling for sustainable green energy alternatives to dirty coal power and the members of the ad hoc group Save the Park oppose the project's impact on aesthetics, flora and fauna.

As proposed, the upgraded power line would cut a swath through the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, the Middle Delaware National Scenic and Recreational River and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

Save the Park members say the priceless view, along with wildlife and their habitats, would be harmed. Towers that now can barely be seen above the tree line would mar the scenery, tree clearing and blasting would close roads and trails, and activities enjoyed by park visitors – hiking, picnicking, bird watching, camping and hunting – might have to be curtailed.

Kevin Pflug from the Newark-based Eastern Environmental Law Center, which filed an appeal of the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities decision supporting the Susquehanna-Roseland line, participated in the rally, along with Dave Slaperud a founding member of Stop the Lines, a grassroots opposition group; **Elliott Ruga from the New Jersey Highlands Coalition**; Laura Dempsey, founder of Save the Park; Nancy Shukaitis, founder of the Delaware Conservation Society;

Don Miles from the Lehigh Valley chapter of the Sierra Club; Fred Stine from the Delaware River Keeper Network; and Martha Carbone, president of the Shawnee Preservation Society.

The project completion date is set for 2014.

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