

Critics say proposed JCP&L substation in Tewksbury would be ugly and not fit in with area

By Hunterdon County Democrat

March 29, 2010, 12:15PM



Photo by Lillian Shupe JCP&L substation opponent Gerry Kalb of Tewksbury shows photos of another company substation that he said was vandalized but not later refurbished.

Opponent

Article by Lillian Shupe

TEWKSBURY TWP. — How can you hide a 65-foot-tall electrical substation?

You can't, according to residents opposed to a substation that JCP&L proposes to build here.

Although the township Land Use Board rejected the JCP&L's application in December 2008, the Board of Public Utilities unanimously overruled the township. The BPU placed some conditions upon the approval including planting trees and shrubs around the substation to shield it from view and help it to blend in with the historic nature of the area. If they can't come up with an acceptable landscaping plan, the company could lose its Highlands Act exemption.

More than 75 people filled the all-purpose room at Old Turnpike School on March 23. The hearing will provide an official record of the public's opinion on the landscaping issue, said attorney Neil Yoskin, who represents the Friends of the Fairmount Historic District. The meeting before the township Committee was requested by the residents after the Highlands Council wouldn't hold a hearing on the matter. Three members of the council were in attendance.

Robin Love, representing the Residents Alliance for Neighborhood Preservation, said the plan fails to screen the facility and does not match the character of the area. For example she said, the proposed vinyl fence is inappropriate. Worse, she said, is proposed simulated ruins of a stone wall that would be 100 feet long, and up to 12 feet tall in places. Love said it will be out of proportion to the surroundings. If done well, she said it will look like a large factory once stood there and was left in ruins. If the "artificial ruin was ineffectively executed, then it will be an eyesore," she said.

Jon Holt, issues manager for the Friends, lives right next to the proposed site. He showed what the substation might look like with and without plantings. Areas under the wires must be limited in height thus lessening their screening capability. "Everybody hates this project," Holt claimed.

He acknowledged that the electricity is needed but, "the problem is it's an inappropriate site." He said he worked for years in the industry and said the site does not follow the industry guidelines regarding site selection. Also, referring to the Highlands Act he said, "Nothing should be built in the preservation area that will endanger anyone."

And safety has been a key argument made by residents all along. Gloria Hernick, who lives on a flag lot next to the site, said landscaping intended to conceal the substation will only provide combustible materials to feed a fire should one occur.

Gerry Kalb, who also lives on a flag lot next to the site, said he will see the substation as soon as he opens his door. He said JCP&L will not be a good neighbor. He showed photos of other facilities that have been vandalized and according to him little was done to clean up the sites in a timely basis.

His wife, Mary Kalb, argued that JCP&L also has a poor record of maintaining its landscaping and its plantings often die. "They are a power company, not landscapers," she said.

Also speaking in opposition were representatives of the township Environmental Commission, the Highlands Coalition and several other residents. No one from JCP&L spoke. The landscaping angle is just one of many ways residents are using in an effort to get the substation moved elsewhere. An appeal in Superior Court on BPU's ruling is pending and residents hope to prevent the company from getting other permits that are needed from other agencies. "There are many reasons this substation should not be built at this site, the least of which is the landscaping," said Mary Kalb.

Highlands Council member Eileen Swann said there was no set timeline as to when a decision is made.

Township Committee woman Dana Desiderio moved to have a letter drafted from the committee to the Highlands Council. The committee agreed to send the letter, provided that the township attorney approves it first.