

Environmentalists meet to strategize on opposition to Pilgrim Pipeline

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By Michael Olohan

CORRESPONDENT

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Oakland — State environmental groups urged area residents to deny access to surveyors from the Pilgrim Pipeline Co. and to otherwise oppose its proposed construction of an oil transport pipeline during a public meeting at the Oakland Public Library last week.

However, a company spokesperson said May 21, a day after the meeting in Oakland, that much of the survey work has been completed and that Pilgrim anticipates applying for "necessary permits" to begin construction this summer.

He suggested that would entail "mostly state approvals" but would depend on the pipeline's final route.

Pilgrim has proposed building a 150-mile pipeline from Albany, N.Y., to Linden to transport unrefined Bakken crude oil to refineries in Linden and then transfer refined oil products back to upstate New York for distribution.

Environmentalists contend the projected pipeline will follow Route 287 through Mahwah, Franklin Lakes and Oakland and other communities before heading east to Linden.

Pilgrim said the route for the pipeline has not been finalized.

Opposition urged

The May 20 meeting drew about 40 residents and members of the media, filling the library room to capacity, and leaving some straining to hear in a hallway.

The meeting was intended to raise awareness about the proposal and rally residents to contact their local and state representatives to oppose the pipeline.

The oil is transported by rail from North Dakota to Albany. Pilgrim maintains that a pipeline is

safer and more environmentally friendly than shipping oil in a barge down the Hudson or by rail. Pilgrim maintains that shipping by barge is "seven times more likely" to result in a spill than a pipeline, according to Paul Nathanson, a Pilgrim Pipeline spokesman, who was interviewed May 21.

Environmentalists contend that Pilgrim is more concerned with expanding the region's capacity to move oil than in providing lower-risk transportation methods.

Erica Van Auken of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition said the pipeline construction will affect drinking water quality because it will worsen erosion on steep slopes in Oakland and the Highlands area, adding more pollutants and sediment to water supply streams and nearby reservoirs.

"We all depend on pristine drinking water," she said, noting that pipeline construction will "cut down trees and strip vegetation from the land."

Dietrich Kamm, of Hope Court, spoke in favor of the pipeline.

"This was a one-sided presentation. My concern is we have 330 million people, and we need oil for fuel, for heating, for petroleum products of all types. Almost everything is made out of petroleum and we will continue to need petroleum," Kamm said later.

Kamm downplayed the group's concerns, saying alternative fuel sources could not adequately replace oil in the short- or long-term, and asked audience members how they got to the meeting.

"All of us came here by automobile," he said. "Even if we use electric cars, most electricity is generated by burning oil. We need the stuff that comes from the Bakken crude that this pipeline will transport."

Where were local officials?

Don Sema of Thackeray Road pointed to the absence of local authorities at the meeting.

"My concern is where is our environmental commission and where are our council members?" he said.

Oakland Environmental Commission Chair Nancy Krause said she was unable to get into the room due to crowding, and decided it might be better to attend another outreach session.

She said that the commission's secretary had stayed and heard the presentation.

Oakland Mayor Linda Schwager said on May 21 she heard about the meeting late and that she was "very appreciative of all the organizations that are meeting together and trying to educate the people about this."

Oakland Borough Council President Chris Visconti said that borough Business Administrator Richard Kunze had attended a county-sponsored meeting on the Pilgrim Pipeline proposal about a month ago and that "there were no government approvals yet" on anything related to the project.

Proceeding with pipeline

In an email May 21, George Bochis, Pilgrim Pipeline vice president of development, said that the company was "disappointed that these groups are opposing the project without meeting with us."

He said the pipeline could "provide a safer, more environmentally friendly, and efficient means to transport these products" and would "alleviate shortages of critical fuels" after severe weather events, such as Superstorm Sandy, when barge transportation was temporarily halted on the Hudson River.

When asked about the meeting, Nathanson said, "I don't think this was intended to be a fair meeting. But we're going to continue with our plan. We believe this is the more environmentally friendly and efficient way to go."

The environmental groups' coalition opposing the pipeline plans has scheduled outreach meetings in Parsippany on May 27 and Fanwood on June 10, said Kate Millsaps, a member of Sierra Club, New Jersey chapter.