

New technology not a gas

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Suburban Trends



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Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly. – Francis Bacon

Back in July, the Statehouse Commission approved a deal to allow the Tennessee Gas Pipeline Company to build a new natural gas pipeline along the path of one that already exists. The project was designed to replace a 24-inch pipeline with a 30-inch model, which would mean faster delivery of natural gas to customers on the other end. The replacement "loop" line in question is to begin in Wantage and run 16 miles to the western boundary of West Milford. The existing pipeline continues through northern portions of West Milford and Ringwood.

A 24-year lease on the land to Tennessee Gas was originally priced at a paltry \$42,750. Fortunately our representatives in Trenton upped the ante to the more reasonable figure of \$180,000, although critics still believe this to be a low-balling of our precious land resource, even if the company makes good on an iffy promise to preserve land elsewhere in the Highlands to compensate for these losses. Considering the millions in annual profits Tennessee stands to gain, the price it's getting to use our public property seems obscenely low.

The length of the current lease allows it to slip just under the radar of a state law requiring any project containing a lease for private enterprise on public lands longer than 25 years to go through a series of public hearings before being approved.

Now, less than four months after it received approval for the loop project, Tennessee Gas is back at the bargaining table, hoping to win the right to continue the 30-inch pipeline into West Milford and Ringwood. Its representatives say this added construction is necessary to meet consumer demand in the New York City metropolitan area. When added to the existing project, the construction will affect 29 miles of protected Highlands watershed and 29 acres of state-owned parklands. Tennessee Gas says the extended larger pipeline's capacity will "add 1 billion cubic feet per day of new firm capacity to New York and New Jersey customers."

Regional environmental groups (including the Sierra Club and the Highlands Coalition) opposed the initial upgrade and they were slated to do more of the same at a public hearing regarding the expansion project held this past Monday night in Ringwood. Their primary concerns with the project are two-fold: First, they believe that the use of sensitive Highlands watershed property to transport natural gas is a gross misuse of the public trust. Moreover, they are concerned with the methods by which fuel companies are accessing the natural gas. A new technology called "fracking" is being used to obtain natural gas by hydraulically fracturing the sedimentary rock keeping it buried deep in the earth. The gas is extracted by pumping millions of gallons of chemically-treated water through the fracture.

Specifically, this is the way that natural gas is being forced to the surface under the Marcellus Shale region, which stretches from Ohio to New York and southward along the eastern boundary of Pennsylvania and down into West Virginia. Hundreds of trillions of cubic feet of natural gas are believed to be waiting under the Marcellus Shale, which could be an adequate energy supply for the coming century. The downside: Fracking generates highly contaminated wastewater during the process. The upside: We'll have plenty of gas to boil our drinking water.

We don't know enough about the consequences of fracking yet to make it common practice. New York recently passed a moratorium on the technology until it can be better understood. Pennsylvania's governor just signed a law prohibiting new gas wells on public lands. Fuel companies eager for profits are crying foul and chomping at the bit.

Although fracking isn't happening in the Garden State, it's worth considering how we arrive at our energy supply before we agree to its transportation through environmentally sensitive areas. Some local activists would like to see any new pipelines built along interstate highways, where they can be closely monitored away from watershed and woodlands.

This is but one short tale in a very long book about how humanity always takes the easy way out when it comes to energy production. Rape and pillage and damn the consequences, we need power now! But not everyone feels that way. Progressives and other forward-thinking people want to know when the status quo is going to realize we need renewable energy methods, not the same old dinosaur bones. As a race, we are remarkably short-sighted; now that the Gulf of Mexico has been cleaned up, we have cancelled the moratorium on offshore drilling. Most experts consider that move to be an entirely political one by the Obama Administration. Lame, I say: This isn't the change I had in mind when I voted for him.

If enough citizens speak out, eventually our representatives will have to listen, so be certain to let your elected representatives know how you feel about sucking the same old energy resources from the earth. Renewable energy is the question: The answer is blowing in the wind, beaming down from the sun, and otherwise waiting for us in a cornucopia of ways we haven't yet discovered.

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