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Power line's critics remain skeptical

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Opponents of Allegheny Energy's proposed \$1.3 billion power line still aren't sold on the project, despite new support for it from the state Public Service Commission's staff and consumer advocate.

Citizen groups in the communities south of Morgantown also continue to oppose the project, even though a settlement announced Tuesday reroutes the transmission line around them.

Allegheny also promised to move a transmission operations center to West Virginia and save state customers more than \$40 million in industry rate reductions, low-income assistance and conservation plans, and deferments of rate hikes to fund transmission line construction.

"I guess the company felt compelled to sweeten the pot," said Brad Stephens, a lawyer for the Halleck-Triune Community Association and the Laurel Run Community Watershed Association.

Stephens said he's not sure what standing his clients now have to legally object to the line, but that most that he talked to Wednesday were not impressed with the route change or other parts of the settlement.

"The consensus among the clients I represent is that this was never about 'not in my backyard,'" he said.

Stephens said both groups continue to believe Allegheny Energy hasn't made a strong case that the transmission line is needed.

Allegheny is seeking PSC approval to build its proposed Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line, or TrAIL. The 500-kilowatt line would carry electricity from southwestern Pennsylvania through West Virginia and into northern Virginia.

Power company officials say the line is needed to provide cheap and reliable power to big Eastern cities and their growing suburbs. But the project has drawn intense opposition from hundreds of West Virginians, who fear it will mar scenic views, lower their property values and continue what they say is an environmentally damaging reliance on coal-fired power.

As proposed, the project would run through six West Virginia counties. It would enter the state north of Morgantown, and run south and east through Monongalia, Preston and Tucker counties to a substation near Mount Storm in Grant County. Then it would extend for 47 miles through Grant and Hardy counties and into Hampshire County, before entering Virginia near Capon Springs.

Until Tuesday, the PSC staff had been among the most vocal critics of Allegheny's proposal, saying the company had not shown need for the project, established significant benefits to West Virginians, or selected the less environmentally damaging route. PSC staff attorneys and experts argued that Allegheny had not fully examined other options, such as building new plants near Eastern population centers or working to cut electricity demand.

But shortly after 5 p.m. on Tuesday, lawyers filed a 23-page settlement between Allegheny, PSC staff, the commission's consumer advocate, and a coalition of large industrial electricity customers.

Under the deal, Allegheny agreed to use an alternate route proposed by the consumer advocate. Instead of cutting across southern Monongalia and Preston counties - where opposition has been the most organized - the line would go more directly south, before cutting east and following existing transmission lines from Pruntytown to Mount Storm.

"If you're going to site this line, that is a better route," said Byron Harris, the PSC's chief consumer advocate. "You're using existing rights of way, rather than cutting a swath through virgin territory."

Harris said he was also especially pleased with the more than \$40 million in savings for West Virginia ratepayers.

"It's rare in this business that we get to achieve those kinds of savings," Harris said.

Lara Ramsburg, communications director for Gov. Joe Manchin, said the governor's office was not tipped off ahead of time about the settlement, or about Allegheny's plan to move its transmission operations center to the state.

Allen Stagers, spokesman for Allegheny, said the plans are still being worked out. It's not clear yet how many of the jobs involved - estimated at 100 to 150 - would be new positions and how many would involve transferring existing employees.

The PSC must still decide whether to approve the TrAIL line, and commissioners Jon McKinney and Ed Staats are not obligated to go along with the staff settlement.

Allegheny asked the PSC to delay its decision, originally due May 2, for a month to study the settlement's possible impacts on the case.

On Wednesday, the West Virginia Sierra Club, which intervened to oppose TrAIL, issued a statement that compared the settlement to the sale of Manhattan Island from the Canarsee Indians to the Dutch in 1626.

"We do not question for a moment the good faith of the signatories on behalf of the public entities, and plainly no one can criticize the TrAIL representatives for seeking an advantageous bargain," the statement said. "However, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the proposed settlement is anything other than one more bad bargain between the unsophisticated 'locals' and the folks on the big ships in the harbor with all those flashy beads."

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