

DAILY LOCAL – February 6, 2009

Opinion

Standing firm on pipeline issue

By John Rafferty Jr., Duane Milne, Andrew Dinniman and Curt Schroder, Guest Columnists

As we write this letter, a federal agency, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), is poised to make final decisions regarding the expansion and placement of multiple natural gas pipelines in Chester County ... decisions that run contrary to local land-use stances, that threaten individual property rights and the local environment. Approval would set back land protection efforts in our county and set precedent for approval of numerous proposed pipeline projects.

As state legislators who represent the region, we have actively worked together to protect individuals and communities we represent that are threatened by pipeline expansions.

Here in Chester County, the move toward open-space preservation and the protection of our watersheds dates back decades, culminating with the adoption of the Landscapes Program in 1996. Since then, Landscapes has saved thousands of acres from development, has been recognized with numerous state and national awards, and has, without a doubt, significantly improved the quality of life for our residents and their families.

Now, as natural gas companies set their sights on Chester County for a number of pipeline expansion and construction projects, local residents find themselves dead in their crosshairs and the Landscapes Program is at risk of being significantly compromised.

We have called on Gov. Ed Rendell and the secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to intervene in the Williams action and all other pipeline matters before the FERC that threaten the interests of Chester County residents and its natural resources. Residents of Chester County deserve to know that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will not allow pipeline companies to continue to pile on the same landowners and communities.

Just as we urged the governor and DEP's secretary to intervene in pipeline proceedings, so too do we urge Chester County government to join with us to protect Landscapes and the legal rights of residents who are being threatened by eminent domain in such cases as the Transco Pipeline project ... a project that poses a direct threat to the local environment. In East Caln Township alone, we face the loss of more than 1,500 trees, and the resulting erosion will likely lead to increased flooding in the Downingtown area.

Transco's 7-mile pipeline expansion project, which will cut through four municipalities and cross waterways at least four times, has already raised serious concerns from three county agencies. The Chester County Water Resources Authority, the Chester County Conservation District and the Chester County Planning Commission have all noted substantial problems with the project as currently planned. It is therefore important that the county lend its full support to the efforts of these agencies.

It is our hope that the county commissioners will take all steps necessary to protect our local self-determination as defined in Landscapes, and file for legal intervener status as we have also asked the Commonwealth to do. We all need to stand together to protect our residents, communities and environment.

We recognize the growing need for energy, and we are not standing in the way of increasing energy availability. In fact, Chester County is already crisscrossed by nine existing transmission lines, and our residents have always been willing to make reasonable sacrifices for energy needs. But there comes a point where enough is enough ... a point where these gas lines or the expansion of their rights-of-way

destroys the very landscapes we have worked so hard to preserve.

We are confident that our energy needs can be met, while respecting individual property rights, protecting our open spaces and natural waterways, adhering to local land use decisions, and upholding the Landscapes program.

We refuse, however, to sit idly by as the FERC unilaterally rubber-stamps the proposed Transco project and others, jeopardizing everything that we have worked so hard and so long for. After all, more than 20 years of land-use preservation efforts and the very quality of life here in Chester County are on the line.

(Sen. John Rafferty Jr. of Collegeville represents the 44th District; Sen. Andrew Dinniman of West Whiteland represents the 19th District; Rep. Duane Milne of Willistown represents the 167th District and Rep. Curt Schroder of Downingtown represents the 155th District.)