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Lawmaker: Commissioners soft on pipelines

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WEST CHESTER — State Sen. Andy Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, accused the county commissioners of not taking a strong stand against natural gas companies that have multiple projects in the county because Commissioner Carol Aichele's husband works for a law firm that represents one of the largest gas companies.

Stephen Aichele is an attorney with Saul Ewing LLP, a large law firm that serves clients from eight offices in the Mid-Atlantic region. Saul Ewing represents Williams, the natural gas giant that is endeavoring to expand its Transco pipeline in Chester County.

Aichele, in a statement, said Saul Ewing has represented Transco for 50 years and her husband does not work on the Transco account. "As has been my practice in cases involving Saul Ewing and the county, I have recused myself from all discussions regarding Williams Transco with our planning commission, water resources authority and conservation district," said Aichele.

Residents and municipalities have been battling Williams to reduce the amount of right-of-way being taken, trees destroyed and streams affected by this project.

Residents who have held out and not signed documents granting additional right-of-way for the project have received letters from Saul Ewing threatening seizure of their land through eminent domain and reduced compensation.

Dinniman claimed the county was not taking a strong stand against the damage done by these projects and suggested it was because of Aichele's ties to Saul Ewing.

"Who do they get the letters from telling them that they are going to be subject to eminent domain? They get them from Saul Ewing," said Dinniman.

"You can understand how the possible perception could develop in the minds of the citizens that this would influence the county's response and when the county refuses to boldly and strongly intervene and defend the citizens of this county, then that perception is real."

He said he wasn't a lawyer so he didn't know if it was a real conflict of interest, but always felt that in government it was a good policy to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest.

He accused the commissioners of not upholding the principles of Landscapes, the county's comprehensive plan to combat sprawl, and Watersheds, the county's water resources protection plan.

Dinniman and about 30 residents attended Thursday's county commissioners meeting to urge the commissioners to become more involved and petition the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to be granted intervenor status. Individuals and entities who are granted intervenor status can legally petition the commission and ask for re-hearings.

Currently, at least three natural gas companies have new pipeline or pipeline expansion projects going on in the county while there are at least eight companies that have existing natural gas, liquid gas or other petroleum product pipelines in the county.

Several grass-roots organizations presented letters to the commissioners including the Citizens Coalition for Environmental and Property Protection, Safety, Agriculture, Villages and Environment Inc., and the Green Valleys Association.

County solicitor Tom Whiteman defended the county's response, saying that several county departments had sent their comments to the federal agency making suggestions that would protect residents' land and the county's streams.

In terms of whether the county would pursue becoming an intervenor, Commissioners Chairman Terence Farrell said the commissioners would take it under consideration and make a decision soon.

"Citizens have been concerned about this for a long time. We have written in support. A further step of becoming an intervenor, we will take under consideration," said Farrell.

State Rep. Curt Schroder, R-155th, of Downingtown, who didn't attend the meeting, said in a statement that he would urge the county to lend its full support and impact of its agencies to help residents in protecting their interests.

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