

DAILY LOCAL - October 16, 2008

Senator hosts gas pipeline meeting

By ANNE PICKERING

WEST WHITELAND — U.S. Senator Arlen Specter, R-Pa., hosted a meeting Wednesday at the township building on the issue of Chester County increasingly becoming a destination for natural gas pipeline companies wishing to expand their facilities.

At the meeting attended by more than 100 people, residents spoke about already receiving threatening letters from Transco urging them to accept offered payments for additional rights of way to avoid eminent domain proceedings.

The Transco natural gas pipeline is the first of three projects coming through the county and the only one approved by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission so far. Transco's project, known as the Downingtown Loop, is a seven-mile section through five townships. Transco plans to increase the size of one of its three pipelines.

Two other projects are also moving forward — AES's Sparrows Point, Md., new liquified natural gas plant and pipeline and Dominion's Pennsylvania Keystone Project.

The county is a destination because there are already three pipelines here that terminate in the area around Eagle: Columbia Gas, Texas Eastern and Transco. From Eagle, natural gas is supplied to the East Coast.

"By the size of the turnout and the concerns which I have heard, I know this is a very major matter that requires a lot more analysis and a lot more fight," said Specter.

He criticized Transco for using the power of eminent domain to acquire more right of way and then selling it to a fiber-optic company. Land can only be acquired by eminent domain if it is for the public good and should not then be sold for profit, said Specter.

He said he was going to introduce legislation to establish an office of consumer advocate with the FERC that would aid residents affected by pipeline projects.

U.S. Rep. Jim Gerlach, R-6th, of West Pikeland, also endorsed the new office. He called once again for the county to put together a local natural gas pipeline taskforce with members from county departments, local environmental groups and citizens.

"We do not have a coordinated effort here in the county to get the information that we feel is important to get to private property owners to better assess environmental impacts and coordinate our response, and provide input to federal officials," said Gerlach.

Locally elected state officials, state Rep. John Rafferty, R-44th, of Collegeville; state Rep. Curt Schroder, R-155th, of Downingtown; and state Rep. Duane Milne, R-167th, of Willistown, all spoke about the need to reform the process.

State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, presented Specter and Gerlach with a Senate resolution that calls for the state's Congressional delegation to support legislation to amend the 1978 Natural Gas Policy Act. The amendment would require a public hearing in communities affected by pipelines if the community asks for it.

Dinniman also said his office would help landowners form a legal defense fund.

FERC approved Transco's project in August with conditions. One condition is that Transco file detailed, site-specific construction plans that would indicate the location of trees on each property where a residence is within 50 feet of construction work space. The plan would indicate whether trees would be cleared. The site-specific plans have to be approved by the Office of Energy Projects.

Transco asked for a clarification of the condition that would allow it to proceed with eminent domain proceedings for landowners who are not subject to the condition, such as those whose house is more than 50 feet from the construction work space.

While Transco is trying to get landowners in the Downingtown Loop section to agree to offers under threat of eminent domain, the chairman of the FERC, in a Oct. 7 letter to Specter, said Transco hadn't received approval to start construction of the Downingtown Loop section.

"Before the Commission considers authorizing construction on this segment, Transco must comply with the relevant environmental conditions (such as providing the site-specific plan) in the order for the review and approval of the Director of the Office of Energy Projects," said FERC Chairman Joseph Kelliher.

To contact staff writer Anne Pickering, send an e-mail to apickering@dailylocal.com.