

Much Heat About a Transmission Line

Joe Nathanson//November 29, 2024//



I have to admit that I had not been paying attention to the matter of a proposed new high-voltage electricity transmission line across three counties in central Maryland until a colleague brought the matter to my attention. The Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project (MPRP) is a regional matter, for sure, containing within it so many competing issues. These range from the reliability of our electrical energy supply in the face of rising demand, local control of land use decisions, the rights of private property owners, the potential use of eminent domain, and exactly who's in charge when it comes to expanding and fortifying the energy grid.

With increasing news coverage of the MPRP, I've tried to do a quick study of the project and the questions swirling about it. Many of you may now be familiar with this proposed 70-mile long high-voltage (500 kW) transmission line running from a substation located in the northeast corner of Baltimore County, across Carroll County, and ending at a substation in Frederick County near the Potomac River southeast of Brunswick.

We are told that the project is needed because of declining supply – as a result of the decommissioning of coal and gas fueled power generation stations – and increasing demand as we move toward more electric vehicles, higher use of HVAC systems and heat pumps, and the expanded needs of data centers, accelerated by artificial intelligence applications.

To respond to this widening gap between supply and demand, PJM, a regional transmission organization (RTO) that coordinates the movement of wholesale electricity in the mid-Atlantic and as far west as Illinois, secured the services of a large energy consulting firm, PSEG, to scope out the route for new transmission lines and develop a plan for meeting projected electricity demand. Starting in December 2023, PSEG reviewed various solutions and in October presented its planned 70-mile line with a \$424 million price tag. That's when many people (who were not asleep like me) began to take notice.

Since then, PSEG has had the unenviable task of presenting its proposal to groups within the three directly affected counties. These groups clearly do not welcome what they are seeing and hearing about MPRP. I took the opportunity to view a video of the Proposed Route and Information Session held in Carroll County on November 13. After a brief

description of the proposal by PSEG project manager Jason Kalwa, the presentation was truncated as a result of disruptions by attendees, including those walking in front of the stage carrying placards and signs with clear messages, such as NO! or STOP MPRP!

After some semblance of order was established, those with questions to ask of PSEG were asked to line up at a microphone and were afforded two minutes each to raise their issues. There were questions asked, with answers generally not well received by the audience. More often there were statements rather than questions, as attendees raised concerns about the damage to farming operations, environmental damage, loss of property values, and even potential health hazards as a result of proximity to the transmission lines and the towers that support the lines.

Some railed against the “green energy agenda,” questioning the closing of coal fired power plants when there is the projected threat of brownouts or rolling blackouts. They invoked the name of Governor Wes Moore and deplored his silence regarding MPRP. Some went even further, citing their “right to bear arms” in defense of their property. Several urged property owners to not sign anything, not to engage at all when PSEG-contracted land agents who might contact them to secure easements for the needed right-of-way.

One other recurrent theme was heard. Why should we in Maryland make sacrifices to accommodate the energy demands of data centers located in Northern Virginia? Maryland’s Office of People’s Council (OPC) gave support to this concern. In a release issued in August, this agency that advocates for the general public stated: “Because electricity knows no borders, it can be a challenge to pinpoint one cause for a violation of a reliability standard that needs a remedy. In the case of ... the Piedmont project—most of the need is being [driven] by data center growth, primarily in Northern Virginia.”

The clamor in Carroll County and elsewhere has had its effect. Governor Moore issued his statement raising questions about MPRP. Retiring U.S. Senator Ben Cardin and OPC among others have raised concerns about the process that led to the proposal now on the table. With so many voices raising alarm about the project it’s hard to believe we won’t see the MPRP going back to the drawing board.

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