

'How can we take this company seriously?' Hanover leaders left with more pipeline questions after Chickahominy meeting

Holly Prestige/Times-Dispatch



Catharine W. Tucker is photographed on Saturday, October 16, 2021 at her home in Hanover, Virginia. Tucker is one of many residents concerned about the pathway of a proposed natural gas pipeline.

SHABAN ATHUMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Hanover County officials had been trying since last summer to get a representative from Chickahominy Pipeline, LLC — the company that wants to build an 83-mile natural gas pipeline through Hanover and four other counties — to a public meeting where residents and county leadership could learn more about the project.

But after Wednesday night's meeting with a project spokeswoman on hand, members of the Board of Supervisors said they still felt left in the dark.

“You come in here, and you haven't told us a thing tonight at all, [and] you didn't even bring a presentation,” Mechanicsville District representative W. Canova Peterson said to company spokeswoman Beth Minear. “How can we take this company seriously?”

The pipeline is proposed to start in Louisa County and run through Hanover, Henrico and New Kent counties before ending in Charles City County. It's being built as the energy source for a proposed power plant in Charles City, not a source for retail customers.

Board members asked about the pipeline's projected routes, to which Minear said she can't offer a detailed map because they don't have enough surveys completed to be able to determine where the pipeline could go. Board Chairwoman Angela Kelly-Wiecek

talked about the lack of transparency with regards to the origins of the project — the people and the companies and investors behind it.

To date, Minear and Chickahominy officials have not released information about the investors and have said they will not do so.

It was apparent Wednesday that board members expected Minear to provide a formal presentation followed by a discussion with board members.

Rather than a formal presentation, however, Minear suggested that the meeting be more of a “guided conversation.” While Kelly-Wiecek agreed to that format, she and board members throughout the night expressed that the lack of preparation for the meeting by Chickahominy was one more area of concern on a long list of concerns.

Minear had been sent questions from board members ahead of time, some of which were provided by the public. The meeting was attended by a small contingent of landowners and those opposed to the pipeline, and streamed online.

Minear acknowledged that the company could have done a better job from the outset in communicating with those potentially affected by the pipeline. She explained that this project is different from other national pipeline projects because it’s only serving one customer — the power plant — rather than crossing state lines, and it’s not serving retail customers, and “that’s part of why we were flat-footed and not appreciating the opposition, because [this project] was so different from the national pipelines.”

Kelly-Wiecek challenged that point.

“How is building a pipeline from point A to point B across private property any different in this case than it would be in going through different states?” she asked Minear.

“You’re still crossing private property to deliver a product from point A to Point B.”

Minear said that in other cases, companies use eminent domain to force landowners to allow rights of way, which they’re not doing with this project.

Chickahominy asked the State Corporation Commission in September to be unregulated because it wasn’t serving retail customers.

The SCC last month ruled against Chickahominy, saying that it was a public utility and therefore subject to SCC oversight. Chickahominy filed a motion for reconsideration earlier this week, which was granted by the SCC on Wednesday, which means the case continues.

Minear said that 60% of those along a rough draft of the proposed route have agreed to have their properties being surveyed.

When Kelly-Wiecek asked how Minear could be surprised that landowners were opposed to a pipeline built across their land, Minear said that the public opposition thus far has been “a generality,” and that “the folks who have given survey permission are a little hesitant about being vocal...and so it looks like there is more opposition than there is.”

Ashland District representative Faye O. Pritchard said she participated in the virtual open house Chickahominy hosted last month, and questioned statements made by Minear then about the local benefit to those who agree to have their land used for the pipeline.

Minear clarified by saying her statements back then were that the benefits come from the power plant and its ability to support electricity demand in the future. She said Virginia has attracted and continues to attract large tech companies that will need that electricity. Minear said if the project gets off the ground and to the construction phase, landowners whose properties are impacted could be compensated at a rate of \$50 per linear foot.

Pritchard responded that the plan appears to be that private investors simply want landowners to agree to let them “violate” private property “for the greater good.”

“Is that a fair assessment of what you said,” Pritchard asked, because “that’s what it sounds like from my end.”

Minear said the word violate “is kind of a biased way to put it,” because Chickahominy is asking landowners permission to be on their properties, and they’re not trespassing “if the landowner gives consent.”

Minear said the company is scheduling an in-person meeting for Feb. 24, but that they're still looking for a local venue. She said they typically like to use places like firehouses and that they like to cater events.

Kelly-Wiecek asked if the company was having more than one public meeting, saying that Chickahominy should be scheduling meetings in each of the five localities affected by the project. Minear said they're hoping to have more than one public meeting, likely spread around the impacted counties.

Henry District representative Sean Davis noted that Hanover has offered its public meeting room since last summer.

Davis said that Wednesday night — as well as the overall experience with Chickahominy thus far over the last few months — it has proven “laborious ... to get answers” and because of that, the process has taken on an “elusive tone.”

He said when developers and others come before the board with issues they know will be controversial, he said, most people acknowledge those points up front. He said even small businesses and churches who seek zoning or other changes come before the board “with a much more detailed presentation than what we have here.”

He said the board's main concern is community impact.

“Time for the conversation was long before here,” Davis said about Wednesday night's meeting, which began at 6:18 p.m. “I don't have any more information now than I did at 6:05.”