

A power battle

By: **JACOB FENTON** (Fri, Jun/01/2007)

Francine Schmitt does not want to lose 2 1/2 acres of her Richland property for a power line that would hang over her back yard and back up to a nearby bass-filled lake.

But PPL Corp.'s proposed 69-kilovolt electric transmission line will have to go somewhere. Schmitt knows that even if the power company decides against putting it on her property, it may just mean that someone else will lose a chunk of their back yard.

"I wouldn't wish this on anyone," she said. "We're fighting for the whole neighborhood."

Richland officials have asked power giant PPL Corp. to consider running the line along railroad tracks or highways instead of through a residential area. But the Allentown-based power company has not yet finalized where exactly it wants to locate the line connecting the Quakertown and Coopersburg areas.

Schmitt is among a group of residents whose property could be affected by the line and is fighting it early in the process. It may be a battle an increasing number of homeowners will face in the future.

After a federal study showed that the electrical grid in eastern Pennsylvania is among the nation's most congested and could begin overloading in a decade without major work, the federal government came up with a plan.

It wants to speed up construction of massive 500- or 765-kilovolt interstate transmission lines running from places like Ohio and West Virginia toward New York and Philadelphia. The new lines will mean hundreds of miles of 200-foot-wide corridors of transmission lines that will likely spark numerous lawsuits.

New federal rules in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 allow the federal government to seize land for the electric corridors. They force states to act on any electric transmission line proposal they receive within a year and other changes streamline the federal agencies' review process intended to reduce planning time for such lines.

Critics say the expanded federal powers are unprecedented.

"The state would have no say in it," said Tom Andrews, a spokesman for Pennsylvania House Democratic Leader Bill DeWeese, who represents a western Pennsylvania district.

Bucks, Montgomery and 48 other Pennsylvania counties are included in the large area being considered for a new transmission corridor, but the only public hearing on the issue scheduled for the state is in Pittsburgh. DeWeese called the arrangement "an insult to the people of the entire Commonwealth."

The federal government has been allowed to seize land for national gas pipelines for over 50 years, but taking it for power lines was new to the 2005 legislation. That authority has so far not been exercised, an energy department spokeswoman said.

States have long been able to condemn land for local projects like the one in Richland.

Columbus, Ohio-based American Electric Power has proposed a new transmission line grid to connect West Virginia to New Jersey through Pennsylvania — just north of Philadelphia.

Ray Dotter, a spokesman for electrical grid operator PJM Interconnect, said the Pennsylvania portion of AEP's proposed West Virginia-New Jersey line has not been recommended for inclusion, but said that option remains under consideration.

Another major corridor scheduled to be considered next month by PJM runs from northeastern Pennsylvania to central New Jersey, but draft maps show it steering well clear of the Philadelphia suburbs by looping north.

The new lines are needed because of steadily increasing demand from newly built developments with energy-hungry dishwashers and air conditioners; every new home represents a potential obstacle to a power corridor.

Much of the problem stems from the enormous appetite of cities up and down the eastern seaboard that rely on power shipped in from the Midwest, where electricity is cheaper to generate.

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