

Township faces long fight over power line

By: AMANDA CREGAN The Intelligencer

The Public Utility Commission will issue a decision on the route PPL has chosen. Whichever side loses with the PUC will likely appeal.

The fight to keep PPL power lines out of an environmentally sensitive region of Springfield may prove to be a costly, long battle.

Township solicitor Terry Clemons told the Springfield supervisors what may lie ahead if either the board or PPL appeals an upcoming Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission decision that could plant a 7-acre substation on a wetlands property and string a 7-mile power line route along the Tohickon Creek.

A final PUC ruling may come in six to eight weeks, but there is no set deadline for the PUC to rule, Clemons told the board at its meeting Tuesday night.

Nearly two weeks ago, PUC Judge Angela T. Jones said she sided with PPL's cross-country plan. Springfield's attorney handling the PPL case will file an exception to her recommendation by Monday, and then the panel of five PUC judges will make a final ruling.

"If we don't like the decision of the Public Utility Commission, then either side could appeal the case to the Commonwealth Court," said Clemons.

After that, Springfield or the PPL may appeal the state's ruling and petition the state Supreme Court.

Clemons noted that, as the case moves through the court system, PPL would have the right to start the project unless the supervisors file a protest. "If that doesn't happen, it's almost certain they'll do irreparable harm," he said.

Members of Springfield bucks Undesirable Land Use, a residents' group, will send a letter to each PUC judge on behalf of the community, said Supervisor Karen Bedics. The group says it has a signed petition from 66 percent of Springfield voters opposing the PPL plan.

Clemons said PPL has a few more hurdles to jump through.

The Allentown-based utility giant needs a state Department of Environmental Protection permit and a wetlands disturbance permit from the Army Corps of Engineers, he said.

The Springfield supervisors have spent \$168,000 battling PPL for nearly a year and have vowed to continue their fight to protect the Upper Bucks township's forests, wildlife habitats, wetlands and watersheds.

"All of this requires a lot of time, not to mention a lot of money," Supervisor Chairman Jim Brownlow said Tuesday. "My understanding is PPL is in a hurry to do this."

PPL announced Tuesday it would cut 200 non-union management and staff positions - half of them at Allentown - to cut costs in a tough economic climate.

Spokesman Paul Wirth said Wednesday PPL isn't backing down from its power line plans.

"That (job cuts) would have no impact on this project," he said. "This project is needed by our customers. We are very determined to do whatever necessary to build it."

Staff writer John Anastasi contributed to this report.

Amanda Cregan can be reached at 215-538-6371 or acregan@phillyBurbs.com

February 26, 2009