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Gas company says Superstorm Sandy highlights the need for back up pipelines

A public hearing in Manchester Township, NJ, on Tuesday afternoon grew contentious at times as speakers took turns discussing a proposed natural gas pipeline that would cut through three central New Jersey counties.

The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities held the meeting as it considers whether the proposed Southern Reliability Link project meets state safety and reliability standards.

New Jersey Natural Gas Company is proposing the SRL as a back-up supply line for natural gas, saying infrastructure damage sustained during Superstorm Sandy proves the state needs redundant systems for providing energy.

“[The SRL project] provides a second major transmission feed to a critical part of the company’s territory, namely ... Monmouth, Ocean, and a portion of Burlington counties,” said John G. Valeri, a lawyer representing NJNG.

“The customers in those counties are the most vulnerable and are likely to be adversely affected by a supply interruption or system failure.”

The pipeline, 30 inches in diameter, would span nearly 30 miles through Chesterfield, North Hanover, Upper Freehold, Plumsted, Jackson, and Manchester townships. It would also cut through the Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst military base and a small portion of the Pine Barrens, a 1.1-million-acre protected natural reserve.

“There is no need for this pipeline. It’s unnecessary, in the wrong place, and will cause irreparable harm,” said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

“You get water pollution from the construction and runoff from the pipeline. You get a lot of air pollution ... because these pipelines are constantly venting.”

Tittel added that construction will also harm endangered species in the Pine Barrens and preserved farmland along the route.

But most of the complaints about safety and inconvenience came from residents who live near the natural gas pipeline's proposed route.

“If there is a defect, there will be an explosion. And they’re happening every day,” said Theresa Lettman, who lives in Manchester Township.

Lettman noted that, should an explosion occur along the pipeline in Manchester Township, a school and the area’s only first-aid facility may fall within the blast zone.

“They won’t be able to transport the children out of the school. They won’t be able to get in if they need to,” she said.

Others worried about the possible side effects on their homes and surrounding property.

"I'm afraid the vibrations from the digging and putting in the pipeline is somehow going to disrupt the connection of my [water] well and that it will no longer service my home," said Cathy Santaniello, a Chesterfield resident who lives on across the street from where the pipeline would be built.

Like many residents in and near the Pine Barrens, Santaniello relies on well water and a septic tank for sewage, and says many of her neighbors are worried about SRL for the same reason.

"My problem isn't just my problem. It's a lot of people's problems," she said.

Some attendees pleaded with BPU Commissioner Dianne Solomon, who presided over the hearing, to make a thoughtful judgment about the project. But others, like Tittel, assumed the BPU had already decided to approve the project.

"Our biggest concern is that the Board of Public Utilities is having a hearing but they're not listening," he said, "that they're really a rubber stamp for the industry they're supposed to regulate."

If the BPU signs off on NJNG's proposal, the company will likely need additional approvals from the Department of Environmental Protection and possibly the U.S. government, given SRL's proposed path through a military base, before it can proceed with construction. But the prospect of such a large construction projects already has proponents cheering the possibility of new jobs in the area.

"We're in support of the line. It puts our members to work," said Matty White, a business representative for Local 825, a union that represents heavy equipment operators.

A 40-year Ocean County resident, White said concerns over the new pipeline are overblown given what lies underneath the road just outside the Manchester Township building where the meeting was being held.

"What these people don't understand is there's already a 30-inch line that runs down Route 70 here."