

National Parks Service hinders power lines in Randolph, other towns

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By Neil Paley, Contributing Writer |

RANDOLPH TWP. - Mention the National Park Service (NPS) and the images are of pristine beauty, protected lands and a haven for wildlife.

In Randolph, and in a number of other Morris County towns, the right word to describe the NPS would appear to be “obstructionist.”

On the morning of Nov. 30, Trina Ruane Mitsch, the mayor of Randolph, hosted mayors of five other Morris County towns - Denville, Mount Arlington, Morris Plans, Hanover and Wharton - and a senior official from Governor Chris Christie’s staff, to try to work out a solution that that will speed the process in the quest to get the Susquehanna-Roseland power transmission line built in a timely fashion.

The meeting lasted about an hour.

The joint project between Public Service, Electric and Gas (PSE&G) and Pennsylvania Power and Light Electric Utilities (PPL), which is targeted to be completed by 2014, will update its transmission lines capacity.

The existing transmission line, which is 80 years old and capable of providing 230 kilovolts (kv), will be joined by a companion new 500kv line, tripling current capabilities.

It will span from Berwick, Pa. to Roseland, a distance of approximateLy 144 miles, 45.6 of which will be in New Jersey.

The project is currently bogged down in an endless stream of delays initiated by the NPS. The NPS is involved because the transmission lines intersect the Delaware Water Gap, which is part of a national park - Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

The NPS is reviewing the plan and is following a step by step procedure, which right now involves an environmental impact study (EIS), which won’t even be published until the fall of 2011.

The most practical result and conclusion the NPS could come up with, according to PSE&G, state and local officials, is to allow the new transmission line to be constructed on the right of way already established by the old line. In that case, all that would result in would be the erection of higher towers than those that currently exist to support the weight of the companion transmission lines.

That plan does not encroach on any portion of Randolph. Other alternatives do.

Officials have also confirmed that the original plan would be the most cost effective, would require less time for construction and would not disturb anything environmentally.

Wayne Hasenbalg, Gov. Christie’s chief of staff for policy and planning, was invited to sit in on the meeting “to help us move the project along,” Mitsch said “It was just basically filling the governor’s deputy chief in on how the NPS has stalled this.”

Mitsch, along with the other officials present, are very concerned that if the new transmission line is not completed within the next couple of years, that there’s a real possibility that during a peak usage period during a hot summer day, blackouts may become part of the equation. “There’s enough evidence to suggest it could possibly happen,” Mitsch said. “It’s a serious concern.”

The state, Mitsch said, was already aware of the situation before the meeting took place. The object, she added, was to get the NPS to

stop dragging their feet. "We want to bring pressure on the NPS," she said. "The powers that be have already spent \$100 million and we're at a standstill."

Hasenbalg said he was invited to the meeting by the township to "discuss where are we," he said. "The issue right now is before a federal agency." Hasenbalg added that last February, the state Board of Public Utilities, in a declaration, approved the project.

"The next regulatory body is the National Park Service," Hasenbalg said. "As I understand it, this is why the towns are upset. We were encouraged to reach out to federal officials."

Hasenbalg said that the project has been delayed by at least two years. "Looking at reality, the role of the state at this point is that we're not in a position to tell them (the federal government) that the project should proceed," he said. "I think they (the mayors) were frustrated."

Frustrated would be a mild term in describing Township Manager John Lovell's thoughts about the bureaucracy and especially the NPS. "I think right now in the process, we're finding out what leverage the state has," he said.

"This is an existing alignment," he added, noting that studying six or eight alternate routes for the project rather than using the current alignment is on the face of it, absurd.

"The people who run it (the NPS) take the attitude that 'we don't want this in the park.' I think what most people don't understand is they (PSE&G) buy most of their power. They're very dependant on getting our power from west of here."

Lovell made another potent point about the economy.

"It's an enormous project and means a lot of jobs," he said. "Other than the NPS, this is a shovel-ready project."

Lovell added that the Obama Administration, along with all the state agencies, should have been pushing the project to begin construction as soon as possible. "Everybody has signed off on this," he said.

Among its other voluminous reports, the NPS issued a 280-page report in November listing the seven alternative routes. Of most note is a list of 10 steps the NPS has published. They can be accessed at parkplanning.nps.gov.dewa.

Step 1 in December 2009 initiated the project.

Step 2 conducted a public scoping, which occurred last February.

Step 3 from last March to July was to develop preliminary alternatives.

Step 4 last August was for public meetings on preliminary alternatives.

Step 5 from September to November was to refine alternatives.

Step 6 the current step, is to prepare the draft of the EIS from November 2010 to September 2011.

Step 7 is to distribute the draft of the EIS to the public and host meetings from October to November of 2011.

Step 8 is to prepare a final EIS from December 2011 to July 2012.

Step 9 is to distribute the final EIS to the public in August 2012.

Step 10 is to prepare and sign the Record of Decision (ROD) from September-October 2012.

"Everybody's in agreement, including the representative from the governor's office," Mitsch said. "Our next step is to ask (Congressman) Rodney Frelinghuysen to help us. We're just going to lay it out. This project is needed and necessary and has to be

done.”

Mitsch wondered what the NPS is going to do when the first blackout happens because the new transmission line hasn't been built. “Are they just going to be content to use candles?” she quipped.

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