



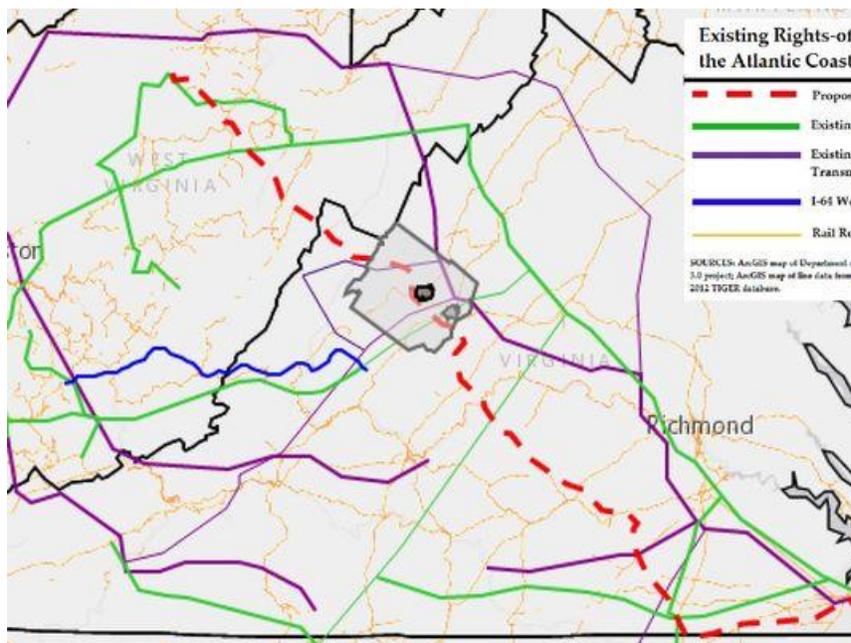
A GANNETT COMPANY

ALL THINGS VALLEY

The pipeline: weighing risks and asking questions

Deona Landes Houff 3:23 p.m. EST November 24, 2014

<http://www.newsleader.com/story/opinion/columnists/2014/11/24/pipeline-weighing-risks-asking-questions/19494431>



Drawn by Travis Geary, co-chair of the Augusta County Alliance, this shows the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline route and existing easements and rights of way. It is in color at www.newsleader.com. (Photo: Submitted)

Re the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline: Do the risks outweigh the benefits? Whom do we trust to answer that question?

I wish I knew.

Part of me does know.

I don't completely trust Dominion Transmission Inc., because they are in the pipeline game to make money. Sure, they are concerned about water safety and land conservation, but they weigh risks against profits. They want the easiest, least expensive route.

Until Dominion goes public with details on why a route through Augusta County makes more sense than a more southern route or one that uses existing rights-of-way and easements, I won't be convinced they've planned the wisest route for the well-being of all.

Because Dominion will have to seize private land for the pipeline, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, in approving the pipeline or not, should hold them to that high standard: what is best for everyone. Obviously, if approved, the pipeline has to go somewhere. Is the proposed route the best one, considering water safety for millions of Virginians? Dominion should have to prove an unequivocal yes.

What does a gas pipeline have to do with water safety? The pipeline's mere construction will likely cause wells to dry and perhaps reduce water quality, which is why Staunton and Augusta and Nelson counties have voiced official municipal opposition.

Augusta County is the headwaters for three rivers: the James, Shenandoah and Potomac. All the water ends up in the Chesapeake Bay. If there were a pipeline rupture, municipal water supplies throughout the state and even in Washington, D.C, could be contaminated.

Could is a key word there.

How likely is a pipeline rupture, considering Augusta's sinkhole-prone, karst terrain? No one knows. According to The Virginia Department of Emergency Management's 2013 hazard mitigation plan, "Pipeline infrastructure, underlain by karst terrain, can be damaged by a collapse in the supporting soil."

Can. A variation of *could*.

Activists with the Augusta County Alliance, an organization against the pipeline, like to point out that the county has the commonwealth's highest rate of active sinkholes. The state mitigation plan ranks most of Virginia with a "low" or "medium-low" "karst hazard." Augusta and 14 other localities have a "medium" rank. Montgomery, Scott, Washington and Russell counties get a "medium-high" rank. Roanoke County and the cities of Harrisonburg and Roanoke get a "high" rank.

Does that comfort, scare or confuse you?

Do you trust Dominion because you've been writing them checks for years and distrust the Augusta County Alliance because you find them alarmist? Do you have a personality conflict with one of the leaders? Are you annoyed by the unending yard signs and letters to the editor?

I've heard all those complaints. At times I have shared in some of them. I have also heard that the pipeline has to go somewhere. True. And Dominion has no interest in building an unsafe pipeline. Also true.

But dismissing the Augusta County Alliance efforts and questions is short-sighted.

Members of the Augusta County Alliance visited The News Leader editorial board on Nov. 11, the week after they made a presentation to FERC. They believe the *cans* and the *coulds* are strong enough to warrant investigation into alternate routes for the pipeline.

To their credit, they are not letting up against long odds. I'm not sure they're always right, but I am sure they are honestly advocating for what they believe to be best for us all. In an apathetic, armchair-quarterbacking world, they are investing time and heart. I'm grateful for their efforts.

Their call for transparency from Dominion on route selection is founded. Augusta County sits on the most direct route from Dominion's gas source in West Virginia to its customers in North Carolina. To my layperson's eye, existing easements and rights of way – where no additional private land is seized and Augusta's karst is left undisturbed – also provide a logical route.

Perhaps Dominion has done due diligence and decided that the best, not simply easiest and cheapest, route indeed cuts through Augusta. If so, the company owes us that explanation in full. I doubt they ever share it willingly. FERC should make them hand it over.

Whatever happens with the pipeline, the community must know that risks were weighed and, to the degree possible, questions were answered. Now is no time for complacency.

Email Deona Landes Houff, community conversations editor at The News Leader, at dhouff@newsleader.com.