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Dorchester Co. residents pack meeting on power lines

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Most attending oppose plan for high-voltage lines to cross county

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CAMBRIDGE Nearly 600 people filled the auditorium at Cambridge-South Dorchester High School on Tuesday to listen and comment on plans to string high-voltage electrical transmission lines across Dorchester County from Taylor's Island to Vienna.

The discussion was part of the Dorchester County Council's regular meeting, though only one other matter was addressed, approving the creation of an alcoholic beverage license for wineries.

The meeting resulted from a previous appearance before the board by members of Dorchester Citizens for Safe Energy. They asked the county council to take a stand against the Mid Atlantic Power Pathway crossing Dorchester. MAPP Project Leader Vincent Maione then asked the council to listen to a presentation about the proposed power transmission lines.

From both of those requests came Tuesday's meeting, held in the high school auditorium at the request of DCSE Chairman Libby Nagel to allow for a crowd she correctly suggested would overflow the council's regular meeting room.

When Kirk Rodgers, the first to speak against the MAPP plan, asked those in opposition to stand, more than two-thirds of the audience rose to their feet.

At the end of the evening, the Dorchester County Council took no action on what they had heard, with plans to consider all that had been said before taking a stand on the issue.

Potential routes were the main new information in the MAPP presentation by Pepco Holdings Senior Vice President William Gausman, director of assets management and planning.

Although Gausman told the audience, "We have not made any decisions on this project, there is still a long way to go," he also presented a map of the potential routes, including one which follows existing rights-of-way for a Choptank Electric transmission line and the railroad tracks from Bucktown to Linkwood.

He said three meetings are planned this month in Dorchester County to review the proposed routes and seek public comment. The meetings will be held Feb. 19 at Taylor's Island, Feb. 24 at Church Creek and Feb. 26 at Vienna.

Overall, MAPP is planned to cross 230 miles, from Pepco's Possum Point power plant on the Potomac



PHOTO BY GAIL DEAN

William Gausman, Pepco Holdings senior vice president and the company's director of assets management and planning, speaks Tuesday night at a meeting on the firm's plans to build high-voltage electrical transmission lines across Dorchester.

River, connecting to the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant, then under the Chesapeake Bay to the Indian River power plant, concluding in Salem, N.J. Total cost for construction is estimated at \$1.43 billion.

"More than 80 percent will be on or along existing transmission lines," Gausman said. The problem in Dorchester, he said, is that there are no existing high-voltage transmission lines.

Gausman also said the plan now is to run the transmission line underground on Taylor's Island and then under Slaughter Creek before it goes up in the air. At previous MAPP presentations, it was suggested it costs 10 times as much to take a transmission line underground than it does to run it through the air on high towers.

Other points, made at previous MAPP presentations, included the inclusion of broadband along the route; the need for more electrical power in the region, with 50 percent of the electricity traveling along the line going to the Delmarva Peninsula and an estimated \$4 million in annual tax revenues to Dorchester County. The projected tax revenue has been questioned by DCSE members, who have suggested it could be swaying the council to ignore their concerns.

Concerns about the effects MAPP could have in Dorchester have included hindering agriculture, fragmenting forest tracts, harm to the environment, wildlife and the county's landscape and the health concerns associated with the electromagnetic fields that form around the lines.

Tuesday's presentation from MAPP officials included the statement that the proposed transmission line would "use Direct Current, which is different than typical Alternating Current. This line will have static magnetic fields which produce less magnetism than the Earth naturally generates."

Gausman said property owners will be compensated for decreased property values with fair market prices and MAPP planners would work with farmers on the location of the lines, which would be strung on sets of two 140-foot towers.

"Our goal is to not have any negative impact on agriculture," Gausman said.

Eastern Shore Land Conservancy Director of Land Conservation Meredith Lathbury highlighted points made in a Jan. 26 letter to the Maryland Public Service Commission which asks for a comprehensive environmental review and "meaningful" public hearings in Dorchester County.

In addition to ESLC Executive Director Rob Etgen, the letter is also signed by Chesapeake Bay Foundation Executive Director Kim Coble, Libby Nagel of DCSE, Dorchester County Soil Conservation District Chairman Wes Messick, African-American Land Trust Executive Director Vincent Leggett, Fred Pomeroy of Dorchester Citizens for Planned Growth and Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway President Diana Thompson.

Pomeroy and Thompson also spoke against plans for MAPP Tuesday evening. Pomeroy recalled opposing plans for a nuclear power plant at Church Creek in the 1960s. Thompson spoke of the importance of preserving the heritage of the landscape where Harriet Tubman once lived. "There is beauty here unlike any other place," she said.

Blackwater Wildlife Refuge Manager Susan Baird said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is concerned about plans for high-voltage lines in the area of Maryland's largest wetland habitat and the potential problem of fragmenting the surrounding forest habitat home of the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel.

Dorchester Tourism Director Amanda Fenstermaker spoke in opposition to the MAPP plan and its potential to harm the landscape of Dorchester's Heart of Chesapeake Heritage Area.

Church Creek Mayor Bobby Herbert and East New Market Mayor Caroline Cline each testified that their town councils oppose the MAPP proposal.

"The MAPP project, as it is currently proposed, is not in the best interest of Dorchester County," Dorchester Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Allen Nelson said on behalf of his board, noting that the chamber of commerce is requesting careful consideration of alternatives to aerial high-voltage lines.

Tom Powley of GKD USA, a Cambridge manufacturing plant, asked the county council to reject the MAPP plan.

"We own property lines with power on it," said Jim Dolan of Hurlock. "It sucks."

Dolan has fought other environmental battles in Dorchester County, including a successful effort to limit the height of the county's landfill. Tuesday he told those opposed to the MAPP proposal to stick together.

He also advised those in opposition to write letters to local, state and federal politicians, telling them, "We will vote against anybody who lets this thing be constructed in Dorchester County."

Dolan's final advice to those opposed to MAPP was that when they went home that night, "Don't feel like you've accomplished something. Feel like you've got something to accomplish."

At least a dozen other Dorchester residents spoke against the MAPP plan Tuesday evening, including Ann Rasmussen of Taylor's Island, who cited studies suggesting that electromagnetic fields from high-voltage lines are linked to serious health problems including childhood leukemia.

"We hope that you've gotten the message of where this community stands," Rod Benjamin of Church Creek told MAPP officials. To the county council, he said, "Please carry out the will of the people."

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