

Opposition forming to Duke Energy plan

Proposal includes building substation, transmission lines through scenic land

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Opposition has assembled quickly to a plan by Duke Energy to build a substation near Campobello and run high-powered transmission lines from the South Carolina Upstate to its Asheville power plant.

Within the last week, an alliance of Upstate stakeholders formed to coordinate its opposition to the proposal, and on Tuesday, an attorney took legal action to squeeze more information out of Duke Energy about its plans.

Hundreds of residents, most irate at the plan and the suddenness of the proposals, showed up to a public meeting Tuesday to where Duke presented the plans to the Upstate for the first time.

Some came concerned about the aesthetics of 140-foot tall transmission towers running through pristine mountains or cutting a path across equestrian trails. Others feared the impact on a burgeoning luxury real estate market. Still others held health or environmental concerns.

"What we all question is the rationale for disruption to our ecosystem and/or our economy, environment for something that's not needed, potentially," said Cynthia Boyle, a business owner.

Duke announced plans two months ago to build about 45 miles of transmission line as part of what it called a "modernization plan." The announcement coincided with Duke Energy Progress' decision to close its Asheville coal-fired power plant and replace it with a natural gas plant.

Proposal

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Proposals call for Duke to invest \$320 million in an up-graded transmission system. It would build a 500-kilovolt substation near Highway 26 near Campobello in Spartanburg County, then would build 230-kilovolt lines along a route still to be determined to connect to Asheville.

Last week, Duke revealed a web of locations where the lines would run. Duke would need to obtain 150-foot rights-of-way along roads, next to golf courses, through homeowners' properties and across mountains.

Duke says the lines are needed to improve the connection between the Duke Energy Progress (N.C.) and Duke Energy systems to allow more importing and exporting of power and to increase electric capacity.

The routes proposed would bring the lines through Spartanburg and Polk counties' horse country and potentially through a slice of Greenville County along scenic Highway 11.

"We live in a beautiful, gorgeous community that this would just scar," said Caroline Young, a resident who came to the meeting.

Neighborhoods and trails associations in Spartanburg County have formed the Foothills Preservation Alliance to

give input on the economic, environmental, cultural and aesthetic impact of the project, said Becky Barnes, president of the Jackson Grove property owners association, which has joined the alliance.

The community is united to fight the project because of its scale and impact on scenery and the tourism aspects of both Landrum and Tryon areas, the gateways to the Carolinas along Interstate 26, Barnes said.

"There's no way this can be allowed to happen," Barnes said. "It will wreck everything that that area has stood for."

Frank Holleman, an attorney and founder of Naturaland Trust, said Duke is taking advantage of the conservation efforts of others.

"Individuals and conservation groups have protected properties, and because these individuals have invested and protected land, and because all of our charities and governments have done it, Duke says 'Well, it's open. Let's just put a line through it,'" Holleman said.

Duke accepted hundreds of handwritten comments from residents Tuesday and encouraged residents to visit its transmission line project page online to view property maps and submit comments, said Ryan Mosier, Duke spokesman.

"We want them to give us specific issues that they have," Mosier said. Duke wants to know about properties along the proposed routes so it can

factor locations of cemeteries or easements into its decision.

"It's all going to be part of the process of us selecting the least impactful route," Mosier said.

Duke plans to take public input through mid-August, then make a final route decision by the end of the year and would need approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to proceed, he said.

Also Tuesday, Spartanburg attorney Patrick Knie filed a legal petition Spartanburg County Circuit Court in an attempt to force Duke to release more information about the plans.

Knie is worried about how the substation would affect the house and 20 acres that his wife owns about 1,000 feet from the proposed development site at the intersection of Highway 11 and West Frontage Road near Campobello.

Knie said he and his wife, Grace Knie, want access to Duke's planning documents and to the property of about 200 acres where it plans the substation and perhaps to take some depositions.

He said two streams and a lake on the property where the substation is planned raise environmental concerns and that he and his wife are concerned about the prospect of continuous noise.

"We understand this is the highest voltage substation that they build," Knie told The Greenville News.

Knie persuaded Judge Mark Hayes to grant a temporary re-

straining order, good for 10 days, blocking Duke from doing anything that would prevent a representative of his wife from examining, testing or analyzing the acreage where the substation is planned.

Duke spokesman Ryan Mosier declined to comment on the case.

Knie said he expects landowners to file imminent domain lawsuits against Duke once the Charlotte-based power company discloses which of various possible routes it would use for the transmission lines planned between the substation in Spartanburg County and the power plant in Asheville.

Dukes Scott, executive director of the Office of Regulatory Staff, a South Carolina agency charged with protecting the public interest in utility matters, said Duke has not filed for any approvals from South Carolina regulators, though he expects that to happen eventually.

Scott said he suspects that the project constitutes a "major utility facility" under South Carolina law.

If so, Duke would need to obtain permission from the South Carolina Public Service Commission, Scott said.

He said three other South Carolina agencies - the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Health and Environmental Control and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism - would be parties to any PSC hearing.