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Central Pa. landowners relieved as PUC rejects controversial powerline project: 'We fought hard'

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6-7 minutes

Hundreds of landowners in York and Franklin counties received notice from the state on Monday telling them their land is no longer part of a utility dispute.

Last Thursday, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission voted 4-0 to reject a controversial overhead powerline project proposed in southcentral Pennsylvania. Transmission lines would have been constructed in both York and Franklin counties, which would have crossed over into two northern Maryland counties.

Landowners, lawmakers, and the state Office of Consumer Advocate in Pennsylvania, along with

several of their counterparts in Maryland, including Republican Gov. Larry Hogan, requested the project be scrapped. The battle had been going on for over four years.

Transource Energy, the contractor selected by PJM Interconnection, was tasked to get the necessary regulatory approvals to build the project. PJM, the regional grid transmission operator, said it had identified the project's need almost five years ago. Officials claimed there was a "bottleneck" of power that wasn't freely flowing south into northern Maryland.

Administrative Law Judge Elizabeth H. Barnes, assigned to oversee the case of Transource Energy's application, recommended in December that commissioners deny approval of the project. Her explanation went on to say that congestion costs had "substantially declined by over \$400 million since 2014" without the new transmission project.

"Further, the project will have detrimental economic and environmental impacts on real estate values, farming practices, natural springs, trout fishing, an elementary school, the Tim Cook Memorial Cross Country Course, businesses, the Owl's Club, local government, and tourism in Franklin County," she said.

If the project had been approved, over 200 landowners could have lost a portion of their land through eminent domain. Some landowners suggested throughout the battle that they would have fought for their land, and for some, their businesses, until the case reached the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

“We are thrilled that the PUC followed the ruling of the Administrative Law Judges, suggesting they turn down this project,” said Delores Krick, owner of Muddy Creek Meadows stables and president of Citizens to Stop Transource. “We fought hard to defeat Transource. We fought for the farmers and private landowners, and for the Pennsylvania utility customers that ultimately pay for these projects.

“We proved that the powerline that Transource wanted to build had no benefit to Pennsylvania residents, and we believed this project should be denied,” she said.

“We are thankful for the support of The Office of Consumer Advocate, our legislators, including Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill and Rep. Stan Saylor, our community, and all others involved in our triumph.”

Republicans Phillips-Hill and Saylor attended several public meetings about the project, fielded many questions, and supported the landowners. Saylor on

Monday said in a statement, this is “a victory for people and process over perceived progress.”

“The PUC went to great and involved lengths to hear both sides of the argument as Transource Pennsylvania applied for permits to construct new transmission lines and substations,” Saylor said.

“Residents of the 94th and surrounding districts spoke loud and clear, the commission weighed that input and simply failed to find justification for granting the applications.”

Transource failed to show need for the project within the meaning of Commission Regulations and the Pennsylvania Public Utility Code, Saylor said. All five Transource applications — four of which involved the construction of substations in York County — were denied, he said.

“I’m extremely proud of my constituents who traveled to every public hearing and took advantage of every opportunity to have their voice heard,” Saylor said. “It definitely made a difference.”

Transource Energy submitted its application for approvals to the PUC in February 2017. Later that year, the energy company filed another application for

authorization to construct a new 230 kV transmission line in York County, known as the East Project, as well as an application for authorization to construct a 230 kV transmission line in Franklin County, known as the West Project.

There were many public hearings, alternate proposals, and expert testimonies throughout the course of nearly four years.

The following was denied by commissioners:

- The application for approval of siting and construction for the East Portion of the Independence Energy Connection Project in portions of York County, Pennsylvania.
- The application for approval of siting and construction for the West Portion of the Independence Energy Connection Project in portions of Franklin County, Pennsylvania.
- A joint amended application related to the East Portion (York County) of the project, submitted by Transource and PPL Electric Utilities.
- Petitions for waiver of local zoning regulations related to the construction of substations in Franklin and York counties.

- Applications seeking approval for eminent domain action involving 77 landowners in Franklin and York counties.

Commissioners also rescinded the PUC certificate of public convenience issued to Transource in 2018, which had granted the authority to furnish electric transmission services in Franklin and York counties.

“We are reviewing the decision to determine next steps,” said Transource Director Todd Burns. “We are disappointed with the Commission’s decision not to pursue this project despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits.”

He continued, “PJM has shown this project is a necessary investment to address market inefficiencies and reliability issues. These problems do not go away with today’s action, and ultimately they will need to be addressed. Pennsylvania will play an important role in transmission grid expansion given the evolving electrical needs in this region and the growing influx of new generation that is expected.”

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