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Power utility, opponents sound off to park service

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ANDOVER TWP. -- A litany of concerns was voiced Thursday at the third and final public hearing addressing alternatives to an electrical transmission line that would potentially cut through three national park units and the backyards of Sussex County residents, among many other communities.

The 500-kilovolt Susquehanna-Roseland power line that Public Service Electric and Gas plans to erect would double the height and triple the power of the existing 147-mile power line running from Berwick, Pa., across 46 miles of northwestern New Jersey to Roseland in Essex County. The utility says the \$1.4 billion project is needed in order to maintain its power supply reliability required by electric-grid operator PJM Interconnection.

The National Park Service, which would have to approve the project's crossing of park land, has outlined alternatives to the utility's proposed route.

Among the 140 citizens attending the hearing at the Farmstead Golf and Country Club, about 37 advocated the "no action" alternative. One Warren County resident, however, said she'd rather have it pass through the national parks than her farm.

Four speakers -- including a representative from Louis Berger Group, which conducted the field studies and selected routes for the project -- supported PSE&G and PPL's proposed route. That plan follows the path of the existing 230-kilovolt transmission line, traversing 4.2 miles of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and the Appalachian Trail.

Eric Svenson, PSE&G's vice president for policy and environment, health and safety, said the "no build" alternative is "not a viable option" and the company's proposed route through the parks "is the best route."

"It was recommended by PSE&G because it is located primarily on existing utility rights-of-way," he said. "It also has the least overall environmental impact on all stakeholders within the 4.2 miles of the national park and along the remaining 143-mile route."

Some of those who spoke against the construction of the lines urged consideration of a non-transmission alternative, such as solar or wind power, which has yet to be explored. Others

voiced their opposition because of what they called looming health risks associated with electromagnetic fields and expected plunges in real estate values.

Several speakers compared the project to the Tocks Island Dam, a project proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers to build a dam on the Delaware River despite community opposition and warnings of environmental consequences. The speakers sarcastically reminded the National Park Service that the dam was called a vital necessity at the time, yet the plan was later abandoned with no repercussions.

Svenson, of PSE&G, argued that the power grid operator projected 23 brown-outs beginning in 2012 if the power reliability is not addressed. Attorney Kevin Pflug of Eastern Environmental Law Center noted, however, that the proposed power line expansion is needed to satisfy minimal energy demands during peak energy consumption.

"Peak energy use usually occurs during three to four days over the summer," he said. "Usually from about 3 to 6 in the afternoon ... nine to 12 hours out of the entire year."

"New Jersey's grid reliability and sacred national parks are going to be compromised so that these power companies can make money exporting energy to New York City," said Kate Millsaps, New Jersey Highlands Coalition campaign coordinator. "To add insult to injury, New York is not even in the PJM region, so not only will New Jersey have to suffer the destruction of its nation park units, but we will be left to foot the bill without the help of New York City consumers."

Patrick Malone, one of the park service project managers, said comments from this set of hearings, as well as written comments, will be studied and an extract will be published this fall. By the fall of 2011, the environmental impact statement will be drafted and available for further public comment. The final report, along with the decision on whether to issue permits or not, will come in the fall of 2012.

Public comment will be taken until Sept. 12 by going online to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/dewa> or by regular mail to: National Park Service, ATTN: DEWA PPL EIS Planning Team, DSC-P, PO Box 25287, Denver, Colo. 80225.

Jeff Tittel, New Jersey Sierra Club director, concluded his evening remarks with altered lyrics of Woody Guthrie: "This land is your land. This land is my land. This land was made for you and me -- not PSE&G."