

Power line foes make their case before PSC

By Ken Ward Jr.

kward@wvgazette.com

MORGANTOWN — Residents here turned out in force Tuesday to kick off their fight against state approval of a \$1.3 billion power line proposed to cut across northern West Virginia.

Power line opponents filled the first of a series of state Public Service Commission public hearings on the Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line, or TrAIL.

"This will provide absolutely no positive benefits for the people of West Virginia," said Robert Lynn, one of more than a dozen individuals and families who formally intervened in the PSC case. "Why should the citizens of West Virginia be exploited by an extension cord from the power plants of the Ohio Valley to the Washington suburbs?"

Allegheny Energy is seeking PSC approval to build the 240-mile, 500-kilovolt transmission line to carry electricity from southwestern Virginia through West Virginia and into northern Virginia.

Power company officials say the line is needed to provide cheap and reliable power to big Eastern cities and their growing suburbs.

But the project has drawn intense opposition from hundreds of West Virginians, who fear it will mar scenic views, lower their property values and otherwise damage rural communities.

"We West Virginians are being asked to sacrifice what we value the most," said Robin Dallas of Maidsville. "This power line is meant to help a sprawling metropolis that we seek refuge from."

Richard Holloway said the line would cut within 50 feet of his home and take half of his 3½ acres.

"When they come to build the line, they might as well bulldoze my house at the same time," said Holloway, one of more than 150 people who turned out for an afternoon hearing session.

"TrAIL imposes too great a burden on West Virginia in order to satisfy the needs of Virginia and Maryland," said another speaker, William Lewellen of Morgantown.

Only two of more than three-dozen speakers at the afternoon session favored the project.

Both represented workers who would build the power line. They cited jobs and economic impacts for hotels and restaurants from construction workers living in the area temporarily.

One of them, surveyor Richard Haveron, also cited the possibility of increased coal production to send more power out of state on the line.

"After all, we should all be friends of coal," Haveron said.

But opponents said it makes no sense to make it easier to provide Eastern states with more energy from coal plants that are a major source of greenhouse gases.

"Aren't these the same folks who were suing us a few years ago because of acid rain from our power plants?" said Bob Bishop of Morgantown.

Another crowd of more than 150 people packed the

West Virginia University Alumni Building for the evening part of Tuesday's hearing.

Sen. Jon Blair Hunter, D-Monongalia, said he's received more phone calls, letters and e-mails from constituents opposing the power line than about any other issue he's dealt with.

Hunter said residents in his district want the PSC to examine alternatives, including building a line along existing transmission lines or putting new plants where the power is needed.

"If we have to have more power in the East, let's build the plants in the East," Hunter said.

A PSC administrative law judge presided over the hearing. PSC staff at-

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**Bob Bishop,
Morgantown resident,
on Eastern states**

POWER

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tended, as did officials from the agency's consumer advocate division. None of the commissioners attended.

Morgantown-area resident Charles Arnett wondered why Allegheny Energy is buying rights of way along the route before the project is approved.

"To me, it's all settled," Arnett said. "We don't have a voice."

More public hearings are scheduled today in Grafton and next week at Canaan Valley and in Moorefield. Two more days of public comment hearings have also been set for Nov. 28 and 29 in Charleston.

Formal evidentiary hearings are slated for January and February in Charleston.

A decision is expected by early May.

The project would run over 114 miles through six West Virginia counties. It would enter the state north of Morgantown, skirt the city, and run south and east through Monongalia, Preston and Tucker counties to a substation near Mount Storm in Grant County. Then, it would extend east for 47 miles through Grant and Hardy counties and into Hampshire County, before entering Virginia near Capon Springs.

Allegheny's preferred route would involve 10 major river crossings and 116 smaller stream crossings.

Nearly 2,000 acres of forest would be cleared for the right of way, according to studies Allegheny submitted to the PSC.

"We are sick and tired of being ripped off and having what

is best about our state taken away for the almighty dollar," said Delegate Barbara Evans-Fleischauer, D-Monongalia.

Commissioners must decide if the power line project "will economically, adequately and reliably contribute to meeting the present and anticipated requirements for electric power of the customers served . . . and desirable for present and anticipated reliability of service for electric power for its service area or region."

The PSC must also decide if the project "will result in an acceptable balance between reasonable power needs and reasonable environmental factors."

If the PSC approves the line, the power company would have the authority to take rights of way through eminent domain. But so far, it is hard for residents along the route to know how much they would be affected. The

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eventual 200-foot corridor could be anywhere within a 2,200-foot-wide route shown on company maps.

And if the PSC rejects the proposed line, a new federal law could allow the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to overrule the state.

"It is wrong that a for-profit company can force a landowner to sell his property," said Jeff Skousen, a university coal-mine reclamation researcher whose family farm west of Morgantown would be bisected by the line.

William King, an area farmer, agreed. "I can't understand how the government can mandate that I sell this land."

To contact staff writer Ken Ward Jr., use e-mail or call 348-1702.