

DUTCHESS NEWS & Creative Living

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Power line limbo

Uncertain timeline puts local lives, businesses on hold



Editor's Note: This is the first story in a series that will focus on the proposed construction of transmission lines through properties in Northern Dutchess County.

by Danielle Fried

Concern over proposed high-voltage power lines isn't just about what will result if they are built. Residents, local officials and organizations in Dutchess and Columbia counties are speaking out about what is already happening: home and property value decline; postponement of expansions, renovations and new construction; and rippling economic decline.

If the New York State Public Service Commission (PSC) approves the construction of high-voltage power lines — proposed to resolve an identified transmission bottleneck between Leeds and Pleasant Valley — communities face loss of property to eminent domain in addition to destruction of view sheds, unique ecosystems and the rural character of the Hudson Valley.

Alternatives to high-voltage power lines, such as burying lines underground and re-conductoring existing lines to handle more power more efficiently, could

resolve the bottleneck with no impact to landowners.

Recent communications from interested parties to the PSC focus on the current impact of the protracted process for approving a project. The PSC is unable to make a definitive statement as to when a project will be approved, but according to a timeline established on the New York State Department of Public Service website, it could take up to two years or more.

Councilwoman Marion Mathison in the Town of Milan feels strongly that the PSC should take responsibility for the lives in limbo.

Left: Omega Institute CEO Skip Backus stands in a dining hall on the campus, which was on the list to be renovated as part of a capital projects campaign. Greg Quinn, a currant farmer in the Town of Clinton, displays a variety of his products. Both Backus and Quinn have put plans on hold due to an uncertain timeline on the proposed construction of power lines in the area. Photos by Curtis Schmidt

"Every time the PSC says, 'Oh, well, we're just at the beginning of this process. It's going to take a long time,' it's like saying, 'I'm just going to stand back and watch you bleed to death and enjoy the spectacle.'"

As of now, the proceeding is in the Part A "Scoping Phase."

While some are encouraged by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's request for the development of an expedited process for considering transmission upgrades, the PSC says the governor's statement does not apply to the local project.

An order issued by the PSC on Feb. 21 states: "The 2014 State of the State address

included a proposal for a new process to expedite consideration of electric transmission projects ... The expedited process proposed in the State of the State address is not directly applicable to this proceeding and will not be employed here." The order encourages developers to modify their proposals to maximize use of existing rights-of-way.

The Hudson Valley Smart Energy Coalition, formed in response to the proposed power lines, sent an e-mail to PSC Secretary Kathleen Burgess on Feb. 14, asking for a definitive statement that only

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Alternative Veterans' Exemption poses difficult decision for school districts

by Danielle Fried

School districts across Dutchess County face a difficult financial decision: whether to adopt the Alternative Veterans' Exemption.

Introduced by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and co-sponsored by State Senator Terry Gipson, the legislation gives school districts the option to allow an exemption on school taxes. While partial property tax exemptions exist for veterans, they do not apply to school taxes, which comprise the highest percentage of property tax.

Gipson announced the legislation in a press release dated Dec. 20.

The deadline for veterans to apply was March 1. Five of 13 districts in the county adopted the exemption in time for veterans to benefit for the upcoming tax year. The exemption is adopted by board of education vote, and requires districts hold a public hearing before the board vote.

Unlike the STAR exemption, districts are not reimbursed for the Alternative Veterans' Exemption.

The law puts some school districts in a difficult situation. Once the exemption is adopted, the tax burden is shifted to non-eligible taxpayers. Districts are caught between supporting veterans and increasing

the tax burden of others.

Most school districts chose to delay a decision about the exemption until a thorough financial analysis can be completed. Non-eligible taxpayers are impacted differently, depending on the level of exemption a district adopts, and the number of veteran homeowners residing in a district.

The Pine Plains Central School District was the first in the county to adopt the exemption. Superintendent Dr. Martin Handler said while they don't know the exact number, the effect on taxpayers will be "relatively small," based on assessed values. Handler understands the difficult position affecting many school districts.

"In some districts, the effects are much larger," said Handler. "The School Boards Association expressed their unhappiness with this, saying it puts school districts in the middle between veterans and other taxpayers."

Other education-related organizations issued recommendations. The Hyde Park Central School District Board of Education President Doug Hieter said the New York State Association of School Business Officials, in a memo dated Feb. 27, recommended districts not adopt the exemption this year. At a board meeting held the same

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STATUS OF THE ALTERNATIVE VETERANS EXEMPTION IN DUTCHESS COUNTY

- Arlington Central School District:** public hearing scheduled March 10
- Beacon City School District:** delayed
- Dover Union Free School District:** held public hearing Feb. 11; decided to delay adoption
- Hyde Park Central School District:** delayed
- Millbrook Central School District:** adopted Feb. 28
- Pawling Central School District:** public hearing set June 9
- Pine Plains Central School District:** adopted Feb. 4
- Poughkeepsie City School District:** still under discussion
- Red Hook Central School District:** delayed
- Rhinebeck Central School District:** delayed
- Spackenkill School District:** adopted Feb. 25
- Wappingers Central School District:** adopted Feb. 10
- Webutuck Central School District:** adopted Feb. 18

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