

Smart Energy Coalition members unite to battle power line construction

by Danielle Fried

Motivational speaker and author of “Rich Dad, Poor Dad,” Robert Kiyosaki says: “Inside of every problem lies an opportunity.” The members of Hudson Valley Smart Energy Coalition seem to agree.

The members of the Coalition saw an opportunity to come together in response to the threat of “monster power lines” proposed to resolve an identified energy transmission bottleneck between Leeds and Pleasant Valley.

Hudson Valley Smart Energy Coalition is a group of municipalities, grassroots organizations, environmental organizations, businesses, farmers and others with a vested interest in assessing need for, and researching alternatives to, the construction of proposed power lines.

“One of the things that is most amazing to me is the amount of civic engagement that is happening,” said Omega Institute CEO Skip Backus. “It has become a way to come together as a group to ask, ‘How do we hold together what is our truth?’”

“We speak as a coalition with a loud voice. Loud doesn’t mean whiney; it means impactful, effective,” said Marion Mathison, councilwoman in the Town of Milan. The Town of Milan and the Omega Institute are members of the Coalition.

On Feb. 14, the Coalition sent a strong message to New York State Public Service Commission (PSC) Secretary Kathleen Burgess: “A clear statement that any project that may ultimately be constructed as part

of this proceeding must remain entirely within the existing right-of-way, and that there will be no taking of any land by eminent domain as part of this proceeding, will significantly lessen the burden on the environment, economy and quality of life in the Hudson Valley.”

Mathison believes the letter “... probably is one of the main reasons why they [PSC] have elected to change their process somewhat and encourage applicants to try to stay inside the existing corridor.” On Feb. 20, the PSC announced that developers should modify their proposals, making every attempt to stay within existing rights-of-way, avoiding the need to take land by eminent domain.

Mathison described several benefits of Coalition membership.

“The first benefit is that the PSC and ALJ [administrative law judges] want to have as many like-minded groups work together as possible,” said Mathison. “What they encourage everyone to do ... is work together. You will be able to speak with a larger and louder voice, and you will be heard by the PSC more readily.”

Mathison said the more than 1,600 individual comments on the PSC website demonstrate the need for groups to submit input jointly.

Scenic Hudson is another Coalition member. Hayley Carlock, environmental advocacy attorney with Scenic Hudson, sees the benefit in avoiding redundancy when advocating for public interest.

“It’s efficient, and it makes us more effective,” said Carlock. “When we submit

scoping comments as a Coalition, we don’t have to be redundant. There are several attorneys within the Coalition, so not everyone has to take that burden on themselves.”

The ALJ also encourage groups to join together when applying for intervenor funds. As part of the legal process, impacted parties can apply for funding to conduct their own research and hire outside experts to evaluate need and alternatives. Reports, research and data obtained by impacted parties become part of the record during the legal proceeding.

The Coalition is considering applying for intervenor funding. Several groups within the Coalition have already been awarded funding, assuring their unique interests are represented.

Mathison and Carlock agree that another benefit of involvement in the Coalition is resource sharing. Policy experts, public relations professionals and attorneys that are part of the Coalition use their expertise to benefit all Coalition members. Effort is also divided.

The Coalition remains insistent that a needs assessment be conducted.

“One of the most important goals [of the Coalition] is to determine the true need for this proposed solution. The state doesn’t have a definition of that,” said Mathison.

Ned Sullivan, president of Scenic Hudson, confirmed the Coalition’s point-of-view in the letter to Gov. Cuomo, which states: “The PSC has not to date — either in its Energy Highway Blueprint or in any public setting — articulated a convincing need for the new transmission capacity based on the most current data about electricity supply and demand.”

If a need is confirmed, the Coalition will advocate for undergrounding — running transmission lines underground — reconductoring and, if new lines are built, keeping them “entirely in existing rights-of-way in all three dimensions” — height, width, and depth.

Mathison feels confident that coming together is making an impact.

“The Coalition has been heard and is growing weekly,” she said.

Coalition members include: Town of Clinton, Clinton Concerned Citizens, Columbia Land Conservancy, Dutchess Land Conservancy, Farmers and Families for Claverack, Farms and Families for Livingston, Town of Milan, The Olana Partnership, Omega Institute, The Preservation League of New York State, Town of Pleasant Valley, Scenic Hudson and Winnakee Land Trust.

Power line limbo

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projects staying within existing rights-of-way be considered. It reads, “A clear statement that any project that may ultimately be constructed as part of this proceeding must remain entirely within the existing right-of-way, and that there will be no taking of any land by eminent domain as part of this proceeding, will significantly lessen the burden on the environment, economy and quality of life in the Hudson Valley.”

On Feb. 20, Assemblywoman Didi Barrett issued a press release quoting a letter she submitted to the PSC titled “Proposed transmission lines already negatively impacting the community.” The letter states in part: “We are seeing that our beautiful Hudson Valley region is already being negatively impacted by this project, and I am urging the PSC and the governor to consider a course of action that will bring peace of mind as soon as possible to folks in the community.”

The Coalition’s letter lists effects of the proposed power lines such as “adversely affecting real estate values,” reportedly “scuttling” property sales, possible “cascading impacts on local tax assessments, collections and quality of life” and the halting of capital projects and hiring by the Omega Institute.

Skip Backus, Omega Institute CEO, confirmed that capital projects, including the renovation of an existing dining hall, have been halted. Backus noted that since Omega purchases construction materials locally from Williams Lumber, numerous economic ramifications exist.

“No one is off the hook until we get that [PSC assurance], and that’s the key to economic development,” said Backus.

Greg Quinn, spokesperson for Clinton Concerned Citizens and currant farmer, stands to lose his farm if proposed power lines are approved. Quinn worked to repeal a law banning currant farming in the United States, and is the only commercial currant farmer in the country.

For five years, Quinn has been importing new disease-resistant varieties of currants from Poland, which produce twice the fruit other varieties. Quinn may delay propagation of the seedlings.

“It’s not just about me and my farm,” said Quinn. “I’m hoping to get these new varieties out to other farmers.”

All information related to the alternating current transmission upgrade proceeding can be found at www.dps.ny.gov/ACTransmission/.

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Alternative Veterans’ Exemption

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day, the board made a decision to consider the exemption next tax year.

“We do believe [adopting the exemption] is a good thing to do, but in fairness to the community, we need to know exactly what it’s going to cost the taxpayers,” said Hieter. “My impression was the vets understood that we were being cautious.”

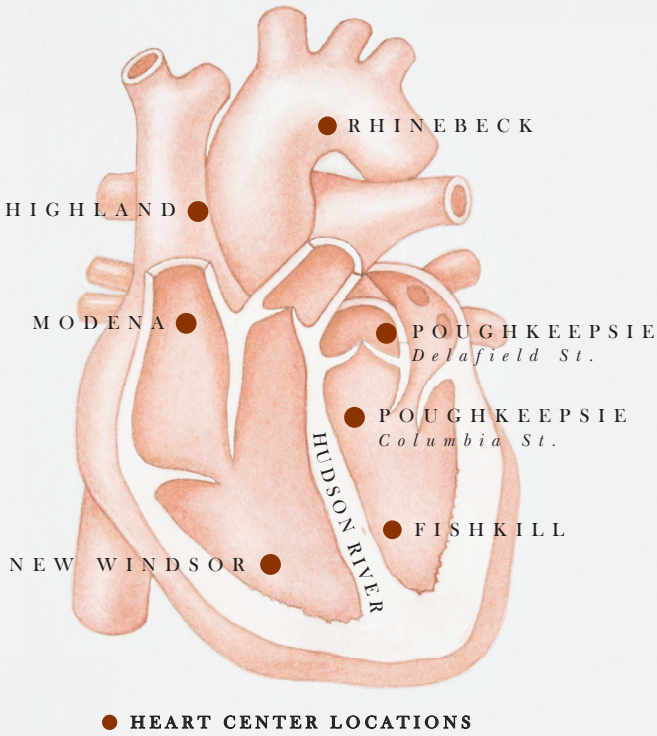
Joseph Phelan, superintendent of schools in the Rhinebeck Central School District, is also tabling the matter until the next tax year, citing a “very tight time frame” as the reason.

“Our board is concerned about having adequate time to consider various exemp-

tions,” said Phelan. He said they need time to do a tax analysis, hold a public hearing and have a vote.

At a public hearing held Friday, Feb. 28, the Millbrook Central School District adopted the exemption at the lowest possible level, ensuring veterans’ service is honored, while shifting as little tax burden as possible. Superintendent of Schools Philip D. D’Angelo said after the meeting, a veteran came up and shook his hand.

“They were very pleased. We just want to look out for our veterans. They have done so much in taking care of us, and we just want to reciprocate,” he said.



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