

Gas pipeline would slide under the rivers and through the woods of Franklin County

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A 'Stop the Pipeline' sign was found on Route 116 in Ashfield near where the pipeline will cross, following the utility right of way. (Recorder/Paul Franz)

First in a series

(EDITOR'S NOTE: In coming weeks, Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co.'s proposed Northeast Energy Direct pipeline through Franklin County will proceed through a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission process to choose which issues to include in an environmental review to begin this fall. This series explores the project.)

A \$5 billion, 430-mile pipeline that would bring up to 2.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day across eight Franklin County towns might sound like a big deal.

But it's only a fraction of a much larger effort — ostensibly to address energy costs in the Northeast. And it intersects a far greater set of issues, as large as climate change and the geopolitics of finding cheaper energy.

First unveiled in correspondence at the beginning of 2014 advising local authorities about Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co.'s intention to survey property, the project is planned to be in operation in November 2018, with construction expected to begin as early as spring of 2017.

The "Northeast Energy Direct" pipeline would combine augmentation loops around existing pipeline, as well as new lines up to 36 inches in diameter, following a path northward to Wright, N.Y., west of Albany.

Entering Massachusetts in Hancock, it would include 64 miles of pipeline largely along existing utility corridors. After traveling through Lanesborough, Cheshire, Dalton, Hinsdale and Windsor in Berkshire County and Plainfield in Hampshire County, the pipeline is planned to cross Ashfield, Conway, Shelburne, Deerfield, Montague, Erving, Northfield and Warwick before heading westward across about 71 miles of southern New Hampshire, ending across the Massachusetts line, in Dracut, north of Lowell.

Lateral lines off the main line are planned for Pittsfield, Haverhill, Fitchburg, Lynnfield and Pepperell northward to Hollis, N.H.

The company has said the project would provide an estimated \$25 million in local taxes around the state and would create about 3,000 temporary construction-related jobs.

To cross the Deerfield River between Conway and Shelburne, the pipeline would involve horizontal drilling more than 60 feet down for an estimated 4,500 feet, with another lateral 3,000 feet under the Connecticut River between Deerfield and Montague.

Kinder Morgan, the parent company of TGP, says the pipeline is needed to meet the Northeast's increased demand for natural gas. The Houston-based corporation is North America's largest energy infrastructure company with 68,000 miles of pipelines and handling transport of about 2.3 million barrels of gasoline, jet fuel, diesel, crude oil, natural gas liquids and other petroleum products. In Massachusetts, Kinder Morgan claims to operate 600 miles of pipeline, including transmission lines in Berkshire, Hampshire, Hampden and Worcester counties.

Safety concerns about the proposed pipeline, as well as the argument that it would help fuel climate change by further investing in fossil fuels and the impact on the environment, have sparked widespread opposition around the region since it was first announced.

Among the 45 towns along its route in Massachusetts, the pipeline has been the subject of votes of opposition, either by voters or selectmen, in some cases including refusal to allow surveys of public property. Among the most recent votes at town meeting and annual elections opposing the pipeline was a 421-78 vote in Northfield, a 51-11 vote by Montague, and adoption by Sunderland's annual meeting.

Partially in response to the potential for battle with Massachusetts over state-protected conservation land, the company last fall shifted its route for the Northeast Energy Direct route to avoid a path that would have cut across Warwick, Orange and northern Worcester County, instead shifting northward through New Hampshire — adding 11½ miles to the project.

Part of the shift also “co-located” a greater share of the pipeline along existing rights of way, so that 90 percent of the route is now said to be along existing powerline or pipeline corridors. That still allows a 400-foot wide survey area centered on the powerline, so the gas line itself could be buried beneath land well outside the existing right of way.

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CORRECTION: The date construction of the proposed gas pipeline would begin has been corrected from an earlier edition.