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‘I hope my town can help me.’ Northfield woman says compressor siting effectively condemns her home



Holly Lovelace of 518 Gulf Road in Northfield sits on her peaceful front porch. The proposed compressor station will be near her home. (Recorder/Paul Franz)

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Like a new car driving off the sales lot, Holly Lovelace's house value, she claims, has dropped due to Kinder Morgan's interest in 200 acres for a natural gas pipeline compressor station one-third of a mile away from her home.

"The value of my home was just reduced significantly just because they sent me this letter," the Gulf Road resident said about the company's plans to buy a 242-acre parcel to build an 80,000-horsepower compressor for its planned pipeline. "Tens of thousands of dollars are suddenly gone."

Lovelace, as well as many other concerned citizens, expressed their feelings about the issue at Tuesday evening's Select Board meeting, many asking for the board's help.

"I don't have a lot of money to hire a lawyer. I don't have a lot of skill dealing with giant corporations and I'm really frightened, and I hope my town can help me not lose everything I've never made in my life," she desperately begged the board members.

Lovelace also spoke at a related state Department of Public Utilities hearing Thursday on plans by Berkshire Gas Co. to buy gas from the pipeline if it is built.

"Our home has been effectively condemned," she told the hearing, sobbing. She added that attorneys have told her the home is unsellable and un-insurable, and she and her husband can't afford to retain a lawyer to help them, so she plans to cash out her retirement account next week.

"I'm begging you," she told the hearing officer, falling to her knees. "I'm begging you."

Back at Tuesday's Select Board meeting, it began as always, with citizens' concerns, and with so many anxious comments expressed about the pipeline and compressor station, the board diverged from its

agenda and discussed the pipeline and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which controls whether it is built between upstate New York and Dracut through Franklin County.

“Well, since everybody anticipates here, regarding pipeline issues, we are going to carry Kinder Morgan pipeline on the agenda every week, whether there’s something to talk about or not,” Select Board Chairman Jack Spanbauer said. “There are a few things to update people on where we are at and I guess it’s a good time to go through that right now.”

During the last Select board meeting, a few weeks ago, Select board member Jed Proujansky was absent, for he was attending a pipeline meeting at Greenfield Community College. At this particular meeting, Proujansky and the other attendees discussed certain pipeline issues such as how they are put in place, the potential effects of a pipeline and legal recourse that can be taken.

“Should FERC decide to approve the pipeline, and it’s often said that FERC has never met a pipeline that wasn’t approved, the next step is to get eminent domain over that route so they can take land as needed and compensate people for the taking,” he told the Select board meeting attendees.

Proujansky assured the residents, even though they might not think they have any say or power in this decision, that they have made a difference with this issue, which has made it difficult for Kinder Morgan to go about the process.

“Ninety-six percent of the people whose land they’ve asked to survey have refused, and that’s a large number and (Kinder Morgan has) never seen anything like that. It’s thrown them for a loop and that opposition is surprising to them,” he told the citizens. “The amount of negative response has made it very difficult for them to respond to the requested information and all of the demands that people have made of them.”

Proujansky addressed Lovelace’s concern as well, with regards to the use of eminent domain.

“Federal government ruling to take land from an individual is one thing, but to take land from a state is a whole other issue that could be tied up in the courts for a long time,” he said. “The longer things are tied up, the more difficult it is, the more money it is for Kinder Morgan to develop and the less likely — not saying it won’t happen — but the less likely it is for that to go through. There are many things at play that we have to look at.”

Lovelace’s residence isn’t the only area affected by the compressor station. There are nearly a half-dozen of other residents who are within the half-mile buffer zone. For 10 years, Lovelace has lived on her land and has spent many of those years paying her mortgage, and is concerned about the effects the compressor station will have on her payments. She told the committee that it’s been her lifelong dream to have a secluded house in the woods, and that “it just fell apart overnight.”

“If it’s too distressing and unpleasant to live there, we would have to just leave and abandon our property, default on our mortgage and declare bankruptcy,” she said. “We won’t ever be able to own a home again and after working your whole life to own a home, we might not have that option again and it’s devastating.”

Spanbauer, with the rest of the Selectmen nodding in agreement, said he understands the feelings surrounding the pipeline and compressor issue, but instead of solely focusing on preventing the construction, citizens should start looking at the situation realistically.

“It’s real clear that this town does not want a pipeline; we have all spoken that loud and clear,” he said. “We need to go to FERC and Kinder Morgan with that message. On the other hand, we have to say, that while we have this position, should it come to pass and there’s a pipeline coming, ‘What are we going to do to mitigate the process?’”

“I knew that this was a possibility, but it seemed like it wasn’t going to happen because there were so many people against it,” Lovelace said. “I didn’t believe it until I got the letter and then I was terrified.”