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Crowd slams state at pipeline hearing



Representatives Gail Cariddi, D-North Adams, Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington and Paul Mark, D-Peru, speak at the beginning of the public meeting about proposed natural gas pipeline at Greenfield Middle School in front of packed house. (Recorder/Paul Franz)

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GREENFIELD — Some of those who spoke at a three-hour state Department of Public Utilities hearing Thursday night sounded off about the DPU's process almost as much as on Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co.'s proposed Northeast Energy Direct project.

In a nearly packed Greenfield Middle School auditorium, the hearing was overwhelmingly dominated by opponents of the pipeline, and of the long-term contract Berkshire Gas Co. is seeking state approval for in order to buy some of that natural gas. The Greenfield hearing was added to the department's schedule only after Senate President Stanley Rosenberg of Amherst formally requested it.

Berkshire Gas is seeking DPU approval for its agreement for TGP to provide up to 36,000 dekatherms of natural gas per day effective Nov. 1, 2018, just as Boston Gas Co./National Grid and Columbia Gas Co. seek DPU's OK for similar contracts for gas from the planned 430-mile pipeline. Berkshire has imposed a moratorium on accepting new customers or expanded service until the Northeast Energy Direct project is approved and in service.

TGP, whose pipeline would cross eight Franklin County towns on its way from Pennsylvania to Dracut, north of Lowell, is part of Houston-based Kinder Morgan.

Several of the more than 40 people who testified before Hearing Officer Laurie Ellen Weisman on Thursday questioned whether the contracts would be in the best interests of gas company customers.

Rosemary Wessel and others pointed to the pending purchase of Berkshire Gas' holding company by Spanish-based Iberdrola, along with Iberdrola's recent agreement to buy 1 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas a year, and also the recent approval of an LNG terminal in Nova Scotia that he said will be a customer of TGP's planned pipeline and of two LNG import terminals in Spain.

"Berkshire Gas' ultimatums," Wessel said, referring to the company's moratorium, "only consider one possible solution. To state a 2.2-billion-cubic-foot-a-day pipeline is the only answer to capacity constraint without any accounting for increasing their own efficiency and conservation program, without accounting for any reduction of distribution system needs is unconscionable, and ignoring leaks and the opportunity to increase energy efficiency for its customers is negligent."

Many on Thursday criticized the DPU for rejecting a proposed intervention by a coalition of municipalities, legislators and the Massachusetts Pipeline Awareness Network, and also ignoring an attorney general's request to halt the proceedings until four related DPU files are acted on.

"As you may be coming to understand," Sen. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, testified Thursday, "people have a visceral reaction to this pipeline proposal, and to any company that wants to be a part of it. Frankly, many are offended by the disrespect with which Berkshire Gas and Kinder Morgan have treated our communities and the citizens who have raised serious and legitimate concerns and questions about this project. And they are puzzled and concerned that the DPU appears to be bending over backward to accommodate the gas companies' and Kinder Morgan's schedules. The department has rejected changes requested by the attorney general that might have allowed time for meaningful scrutiny of the proposed agreement. The Department denied the Conservation Law Foundation's request for just an additional week to prepare testimony."

"To us, this sounds like the hearing officer has already pre-judged these cases," Irvine Sobelman of Northampton told the DPU. "And we don't see any sign that the pre-judgment is about (the pipeline) being a poor fit for the public interest — which, of course, we would support because we find this to be the overriding truth of the situation."

Hillary Hoffman, a member of the Greenfield Town Council, which was part of the joint intervention rejected by the DPU, told the hearing, "I find it disturbing that anyone would challenge the right of property owners, community members, utility customers, and taxpayers to participate in a fair and open process. As we bear the risk, the burden, and ultimately, the expense. ... But if you're taking our tax dollars, and we're paying our energy bills, you work for us. And here's what many of us want: We want Berkshire Gas to pursue alternatives, not issue ultimatums and surprise moratoriums."

Only two of the first nearly 40 speakers made comments favoring the pipeline and the case before the DPU.

Along with Greenfield Town Councilor Isaac Maas, saying additional gas was needed to fuel industrial growth in the town, Chelsea Furlon was one of about 30 members of Laborers' International Union of North America Local 596 who turned up wearing orange shirts reading, "Our Jobs are On the Line."

"I support the pipeline. This is our Big Dig," she told the gathering, which broke into heckling. "I work every day. I work so hard. And I never was told it was wrong until I came here and listened to these people."

Conway Selectman Jim Moore was one of about a dozen local officials who spoke.

"We are here to make you aware of our common concerns as citizens who truly care about this part of our commonwealth. The citizens should have a say and should be listened to by the agencies that live off the taxes that the people have to pay. ... This is wrong."



Protestors and supporters outside the Greenfield Middle School before Public DPU meeting.
(Recorder/Paul Franz)



People sign up to speak at Public DPU meeting about the proposed natural gas pipeline.
(Recorder/Paul Franz)



DPU meeting called to order. (Recorder/Paul Franz)



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