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News

Neighbors Charged Up Over Butler Substation

by Nancy Jones

The question from Hanover Road residents was simple: why build an electric substation in the middle of rural Baltimore County?

The answer from BGE officials also was simple: the parcel is the only one that meets the company's requirements.

Unfortunately, the parcel that once was home for Camp Holiday property located north of Glyndon and west of Butler is surrounded by permanently preserved rural properties. And the proposed regional substation is far from what neighbors want in the rural area. Still, contend BGE officials, only a portion of the 90-acre parcel off Kemp Road north of Glyndon and west of Butler will be needed for the substation. The rest will remain intact.

The two sides squared off at a December 8 meeting of the Hanover Road Association meeting. It was the first opportunity locals had to ask questions of BGE officials about the proposed regional substation on the former Camp Holiday property located off Kemp Road. And the company officials gave it to the homeowners straight.

'Really big facility'

BGE representatives at the meeting explained that after an exhaustive search this was the only property in the existing transmission corridor suitable for such a project. It best met the needs of the electrical service with a minimal environmental disturbance. The substation is needed to increase system reliability, according to BGE officials.

"The only place, the only property that would meet the criteria, was this site," said Rob Gould, a vice president with BGE.

And recognizing the sensitivity of the issue, BGE officials promised to continue discussions with community leaders and homeowners.

"Our main goal tonight is to tell you what we know," said Gould. "This will not be the last time you hear from us. We want an open dialogue."

Teresa Moore, executive director of the the Valleys Planning Council, a land preservation group, said she would form a working committee that would meet with BGE officials starting in 2011.

"It's a really big facility and we're still trying to understand the need associated

with it," said Moore.

"It's in the Piney Run Rural Legacy area which is targeted for agricultural activities," said Moore. "There are a lot of people wondering if there isn't a better location."

Ample green space

Of the 90-acre property that would house the new regional substation, only 30-to-40 acres of the site will be disturbed and there will be ample green space next to neighboring properties, said BGE officials. Also, the project could result in an upgrade of Kemp Road, a small rural road in the area, to handle construction equipment to-and-from the site.

BGE officials still must get special permission for the project from Baltimore

County zoning officials at a public hearing where citizens can present their objections to the proposal. A request for that hearing has not been requested yet by BGE officials.

Gould stated that the facility, once it was built, would be landscaped and a locked gate would surround

it. BGE would implement any noise mitigation found to be necessary and would discuss placing any unused portion of the property into a conservation easement.

If allowed to go forward, construction of the project would begin in 2013, said BGE officials.

'Seems ironic'

But neighbors at the meeting questioned why BGE needed to impact the rural area with such a large, industrial project. They sought answers about what the visual impact and noise impact would be and how the roads would be disturbed. They also wanted to know why the existing BGE substation facility at Cockeys Mill Road could not be used.

BGE officials said they looked into using the Cockeys Mill Road site but it posed significant wetland and topography constraints.

Residents also had concerns about future improvements to the site.

Michele Naish, an adjacent neighbor to the proposed substation, said the meeting was well organized but she still has more questions about the project. A major concern for neighbors is if the regional substation is built, what will happen at the site in five or 10 years, she said.

"They were pretty clear at that meeting that they did not want to promise that

"It's not a 'nice to have;' it's a 'need to have.'"

--Rob Gould

was all it would be," Naish said.

Naish put her 30-acre property into permanent preservation, as did many of her neighbors, in an effort to protect the agricultural nature of the land and the natural resources that are offered there.

"It seems ironic that the neighbors around [the former] Camp Holiday have done this and now Camp Holiday will be this mega, 30-to-35 acre industrial, commercial substation facility," she said.

'The least invasive'

Naish has agreed to take part in the working committee put together by the Valleys Planning Council. She added she hopes the committee provides an opportunity to keep a two-way conversation going and allow residents to be fully informed as the project progresses forward.

Bob Slaterbeck, a board member of the Hanover Road Association, will serve as his organization's representative on the working committee.

He agreed that an on-going conversation was needed to ensure the least impact on the surrounding area. Limiting improvements to Kemp Road also were important to the community.

"We want to get the facts and to push this thing to be the least invasive project

possible," Slaterbeck said.

Why needed

BGE vice president Gould said his company would be an "open book" when it came to the project.

"We're not going to do this in a vacuum," said Gould. "It's not our intention to pull off any surprises. It's our intention to be very open."

He added that while residents might not like the plans for the project, he hopes there is at least an understanding of what BGE plans to do and why they need to do it.

"The substation is absolutely essential. It's not a 'nice to have;' it's a 'need to have,'" said Gould.

The project is a requirement of PJM, a transmission organization that "coordinates the movement of wholesale electricity in all or parts of 13 states and the District of Columbia," according to the company's web site.

PJM dictates the reliability needs. Before settling on the Kemp Road location, BGE looked at multiple sites in Baltimore County but other sites would have required more construction and more acreage to connect with the existing equipment and meet the needs of the project.



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