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SCC issues decision directing Dominion Energy to bury transmission line under the Rappahannock River

by Audrey Thomasson

WHITE STONE—The Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC) on December 21 ruled against Dominion Energy's plan to build 10 steel towers across the Rappahannock River near the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge to carry new transmission lines.

Instead, the SCC directed the utility to install a new line under the river along the 2.2 mile crossing from Greys Point to White Stone and gave Dominion 120 days to seek the necessary permits.

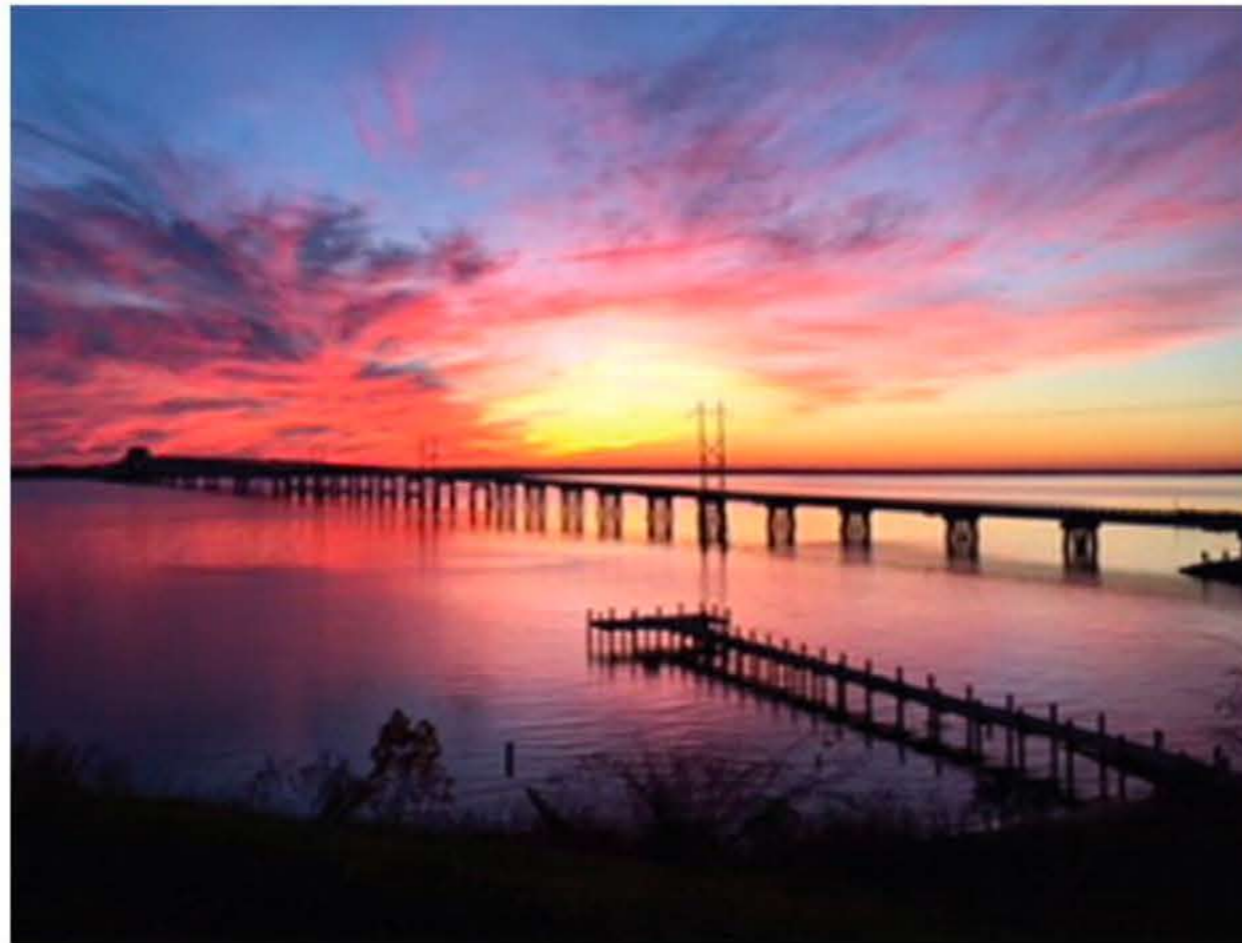
The commissioners wrote, "Given that attachment to the Norris Bridge is no longer feasible, the commission finds that the underwater construction as approved herein reasonably minimizes adverse impacts of the replacement line."

Commissioners noted "underwater construction...satisfies the statutory requirements and best serves the total public interest within the parameters of the statute.

"This finding includes consideration of among other things: need; cost; reliability; the environment; scenic assets; historic districts; health and safety of the persons in the area; economic development; local comprehensive plans; proposed method of installation; possible impediments to timely construction; and rights-of-way."

The ruling was a win for restaurateur William Barnhardt, who became the face of the opposition when he filed and won an injunction against the utility in late 2015 after a barge suddenly appeared on the river next to the Norris Bridge in preparation for tower construction. Barnhardt owns Willaby's Cafe, just upriver from the foot of the bridge.

"Today's SCC decision requiring Dominion Energy to place transmission lines underneath the Rappahan-



The view of the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge (above) will not include transmission lines and towers above the Rappahannock River. Photo by Sandy Neumann

nock River near the Chesapeake Bay is a courageous ruling that will protect and preserve one of Virginia's precious assets," said Barnhardt.

The commission order directs Dominion to use horizontal-directional drilling to install the line.

"The SCC has confirmed this rebuild project is needed and will improve electric reliability for the 19,000 homes and businesses in the Northern Neck area that depend on us. We look forward to completing this much-needed project," Dominion spokesman David Botkins said in a statement.

The number includes electric cooperatives served by Dominion. Botkins said the company does not intend to appeal the decision.

When Dominion started the project in 2015, it bypassed the SCC, claiming the project was routine maintenance and did not need commission

approval.

However, Emily Davies of Urbanna noticed an advertisement outlining a vague description of Dominion's tower proposal. She filed an objection that forced a hearing before the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. At the hearing she realized the pro-

posal was for something more intrusive than a simple rebuild of the existing line, most of which is attached to the bridge.

Davies alerted residents and a coalition of citizens in Lancaster and Middlesex counties formed Save the Rappahannock and joined Barnhardt's lawsuit with the SCC.

Both counties adopted resolutions opposing the towers. Also passing opposition resolutions were the towns of Kilmarnock, Irvington and Urbanna bolstered by 150 local business owners.

Although Dominion representatives had appeared before the Lancaster board of supervisors with their plan, the presentation was misleading, according to District 3 supervisor Jason Bellows.

"Dominion tried to hide its true objective by mischaracterizing the much taller towers it proposed to erect across the entire breadth of the river and by producing visual simulations from such a great distance and at angles that made it hard to see a 110' tall bridge, much less their proposed towers," said Bellows.

During the SCC hearings, Dominion argued that frequent maintenance of the Norris Bridge by the Virginia Department of Transportation required the utility to de-energize

lines regularly for workers' safety, leaving the only source of power to lines extending from Warsaw. Additionally, they maintained that continued attachment to the bridge no longer meets reliability standards.

Expert witnesses for the utility testified the cost would be substantially more for underwater lines, while experts for the opposition argued the underwater cost could be less than building towers.

Opposition witnesses, including environmental and historic preservation groups, called the towers a threat to the environment and to the county's comprehensive plan to maintain the pristine nature of the area. Also, they said the mega-towers would hurt the local economy that depends on tourism, and that bumpers around the water line at the tower base would be a hazard to commercial and recreational boaters.

During the two-year battle, hundreds of citizens opposed to the towers turned out for public hearings in Kilmarnock and at SCC headquarters in Richmond.

"These many citizens are the real heroes of this story," said Save the Rappahannock president Carl Smith.

"This is a great day for Virginia and for all those who value her scenic resources," he said.