

Plug pulled on gas pipeline plan

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The final shoe dropped Monday, as Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co. formally withdrew its federal application to build a 416-mile pipeline through the region.

The company's filing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission follows its April 22 announcement it was suspending further work on the \$5 billion project, which would have crossed Plainfield and eight Franklin County towns on its path from Pennsylvania shale gas fields through Wright, N.Y., and across Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire to Dracut.

The company, which had filed its application with federal regulators in November, had faced enormous opposition from towns along its route as well as state and congressional officials, along with regional planning agencies.

"We had shifted our workloads so we could fit this in," said Franklin Regional Council of Governments Executive Director Linda Dunlavy, adding that the that the additional demands on the agency were "very draining."

Several Franklin County towns had contributed money toward a special intervention fund, which the COG had expected to use for technical expertise to review environmental impact statements. Dunlavy said the unspent portion of that money will now be returned to the towns. "This allows us to refocus our debate in the Legislature during the next 75 days or so on our green energy future," said Senate President Stanley Rosenberg, "and replacing a little over 9,000 megawatts of energy coming offline from oil and coal-fired plants, continuing to replace them with as much renewable energy as possible."

In the House, which was preparing to release an energy legislation package that does not include a provision for a tariff on electricity customers to build new gas pipelines, Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, called TGP's announcement "very good news for Franklin County and western Massachusetts and the whole commonwealth. The project presented many environmental, public safety and financial challenges to the region. Its official end is something the people can take a lot of pride in contributing to through their arguments and actions."

Kulik, a strong opponent of the project, said its demise resulted from a combination of it not being financially feasible and "the enormous public engagement and opposition, which had to impact Tennessee Gas's decision."

Now attention turns to Berkshire Gas Co., which has refused to lift a moratorium on new customers and expanded service in Franklin and Hampshire counties that had been conditioned on the Northeast Energy Direct pipeline approval. "That's very much an issue," said Kulik, along with Rosenberg who has been having conversations with the gas distribution companies about ways of augmenting its gas supply now that TGP has pulled the plug on NED.

"We will continue to strategize in conversations with Berkshire Gas and try to push them in the direction where the moratorium can be lifted.," Kulik added.

A Berkshire Gas spokesman told The Recorder on Monday, "While we don't expect a quick solution, we are committed to pursuing any and all practical options. Berkshire Gas is actively engaged in a thorough vetting, and in many instances re-vetting, of any and all alternatives that may allow us to provide additional volumes of natural gas in Franklin and Hampshire counties at some future point."

But he added, "Until a practical solution can be identified however, the moratorium will remain in effect."

Whereas Columbia Gas Co. has withdrawn its application with the state Department of Public Utilities to use gas from the NED pipeline, Berkshire Gas has not, noted Katherine Eiseman, president of PipeLine Awareness Network for the Northeast.

"It's nice to see that that I is dotted and T is crossed at FERC," Eiseman said. "But we know that (TGP parent) Kinder Morgan still wants a fast route to Dracut. They have a ready and eager customer in Berkshire Gas" as well as at Erving Paper Co. and in Vernon, Vt., where a gas-fired generation plant has been proposed for the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant site. "There's still a lot of bubbling in the western Mass. and the Vermont part of the equation."

Another unresolved issue is in Sandisfield, where a Berkshire Superior Court decision has allowed TGP to proceed with plans to begin work on a smaller Connecticut Expansion Project through Otis State Forest, despite Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution prohibiting the taking of environmentally protected land without a two-thirds legislative vote.

The state Attorney General's office has not yet said whether it plans to appeal that decision, which could have implications for a Spectra gas pipeline project in the eastern part of the state.

Meanwhile, there was a celebratory mood against opponents of the NED project who had been fighting it for 2½ years.

"We're glad the towns no longer have to spend their money defending themselves," said Jed Proujansky of Northfield, who coordinated a coalition of towns battling the NED project. "We knew the project was dead, and they finally realized it was not viable to build a pipeline through western Massachusetts."

"We are overjoyed with Kinder-Morgan's decision," said Vincent DeVito, attorney for Northeast Energy Solutions, a coalition of environmental organizations including Franklin Land Trust. "They just made official what we had made clear to FERC more than a year ago: Northeast Energy Direct was a \$3.1 billion export project that was never financially viable and would have been an economic and environmental disaster for Massachusetts taxpayers. We believe our legal strategy of making Federal regulators aware of the project's risks was instrumental in Kinder Morgan's decision."

In announcing its decision last month to suspend its project, TGP had told FERC that it could not attract enough customers to make building the pipeline economical.

It said that it would make a final decision by this coming Thursday after working out the project's contractual arrangements.