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New pipeline route raises questions

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MERRIMACK - Energy giant Kinder Morgan updated the route of a natural gas pipeline proposed to run through New Hampshire, with the new Merrimack route passing through Fidelity Investments and near the Merrimack Premium Outlets.

The latest change addressed some environmental and safety concerns in the area, but not all.

"I don't think it's any better, it's just different," Merrimack Town Council Chairman Nancy Harrington said Monday.

Harrington said while the new proposed route is farther away from Thorntons Ferry Elementary School, it still passes through an aquifer by Pennichuck Water Works.

"It really doesn't solve the problem," she said. "The only improvement is the school."

Town and school officials wanted the route 1,000 feet from the school building, which it is at 1,100 feet; but the route is still less than 1,000 feet from the playground.

Harrington said the distance from the playground will be addressed in a future work session with Kinder Morgan representatives, along with questions about how the new route may impact the town, at a date to-be-announced.

"They're going right next to Fidelity, making the land worthless, because you can't build on top of a pipeline," said Harrington. "They're also going to have to dynamite the hill by the outlet mall."

Fidelity officials said they are following the approval process, including the latest adjustment that would send the pipeline through the company's Merrimack campus.

"We are aware of the latest draft version of the proposed route and have been in contact with Merrimack town officials, Kinder Morgan, and a number of other Merrimack businesses whose property will be impacted by this current plan," the

company said in a statement. "It's important for all parties to have an open dialogue with the goal of coming to a resolution."

Final approval for the pipeline rests with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. New Hampshire residents have been following the process since 2014, notifying FERC and state officials of local environmental and safety worries.

Called the Northeast Energy Direct Project, the pipeline would transport gas from the Marcellus Shale formation in Pennsylvania to Dracut, Mass., through New York, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Amherst residents have pushed for a less disruptive route that avoids environmentally sensitive areas. They found some relief with the latest route, which goes around some conservation areas such as Ponemah Bog, the Souhegan River and residential cul-de-sacs.

The current route enters Merrimack from Amherst along Route 101A, crossing between Autofair and Home Depot to veer north along Continental Boulevard. The route closely follows Continental through Merrimack, passing through the Fidelity Investments campus and around the Merrimack Premium Outlets.

The route then moves east under the Everett Turnpike just north of Elbit Systems, and crosses beneath Daniel Webster Highway by the Anheuser-Busch Brewery. Continuing east, the pipeline travels under the Merrimack River where it enters Litchfield.

Harrington said town officials have notified the Merrimack businesses in close proximity to the new route, but that business owners will decide whether to get involved in the future meetings with Kinder Morgan.

"They will do their own research and decide how to respond," she said.

The other new variable is a potential metering station, a facility used to regulate pipeline pressure, to be located near the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, although details remain vague.

"We've heard nothing specific on that," said Harrington, adding the council recently submitted a letter to FERC expressing concerns over the metering station.

In a town council meeting last week, residents worried the new route could diminish the quality of life for town residents, specifically residents of the Home Hospice Center in south Merrimack, which sits 400 feet from the new route, and Thortons Ferry students.

"I have tremendous concerns about that pipeline coming so close to Thorntons Ferry," said Wendy Thomas of Merrimack. Thomas noted students with special

needs, including sensory issues, could be disturbed by potential blasting as the route is put in place.

Julie Penney, of Merrimack, said she felt residents were generally uninformed about the pipeline project, and advocated for more civic involvement.

"There's a lack of connection with this, in this town," said Penney, "People just have no idea what's going on."

Anticipated approval from FERC may be as early as fall 2016, with construction beginning January 2017.

A comprehensive list of information, town correspondence and resources on the pipeline project as it relates to southern New Hampshire communities can be found on the Merrimack town website, www.merrimacknh.gov.

The Nashua Regional Planning Commission posted a detailed map of the proposed route online at www.mapgeo.com/nrpcnh/?extent=-8025887,5257185,-7903588,5314972&basemap=BM&thematicmap=NED.

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