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Pipeline officials update route

By TINA FORBES
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MERRIMACK - Kinder Morgan representatives met with Merrimack town, school and conservation officials for a special meeting Thursday to discuss a new route for a natural gas pipeline proposed to run through town.

While the meeting was originally scheduled to discuss a change drafted in September, Kinder Morgan officials arrived with a revised version, which town officials saw for the first time at the meeting.

Allen Fore, Kinder Morgan spokesman, said finding the right path is a fluid process. "We're still in a pre-filing process," said Fore, adding that they are going to continue to refine the process to make it the "least impactful as possible."

The new draft was made after Kinder Morgan met with the Department of Transportation and business owners affected by the previous route, specifically Fidelity Investments and Simon Malls, which owns the Merrimack Premium Outlets.

The revised route shows the pipeline passing through town at a greater distance from Pennichuck Water Works and Thorntons Ferry School; two areas that have been of concern.

Fore said instead of just over 1,000 feet, the pipeline is now "well over 1,500 feet" from the elementary school.

Council chairwoman Nancy Harrington said she reviewed the modification, and has some new questions.

"Some of these (concerns) you have addressed," she said, but added there are new potential impacts to consider. "The route is within 750 feet of the South Merrimack Christian Academy."

Although the route is farther from Pennichuck and Thorntons Ferry School, Harrington continued, it impacts a new list of property owners on the north side of Continental Boulevard.

Community Hospice House in south Merrimack is within several hundred feet of the proposed route as well, said Harrington.

Jody Vaillancourt said with the changing versions of the route, the town and property owners have little time to provide feedback.

"We're at a huge disadvantage, and I think you know that, and I am very resentful of that," said Vaillancourt.

Fore said the route is not yet set in stone. "We will be, and are planning to file with FERC in the fourth quarter, so that is forthcoming, but it hasn't happened yet," he said.

Chris Ortega, head of the town school board, said he was still concerned about Thorntons Ferry. "One of the things you may not be aware of is in addition to an outdoor playground we have paths ... that get used every day."

Ortega said it is unclear whether the new route is really 1,000 feet from student activity on campus. "It seems you received our letter this week, and tried to make some adaptations, but based on what I see, the school board would still oppose," said Ortega.

Tim Tenhave, head of the conservation committee, said the route is passing through a "highest ranked habitat."

The new route would enter the town along 101A, as it did in the previous draft, but it would now pass through town on the north side versus south side of Continental Boulevard. Also, instead of passing through the west side of the Fidelity campus, the route would hug the Everett Turnpike on its way by Fidelity and the outlet malls by Exit 10.

Town Councilor Tom Koenig said he appreciates that the company has been working with businesses to adjust the route, but said he's thinking of homeowners. "It does suddenly affect the backyards of a lot of people on Thornton Road," he said, adding it doesn't address the issues at the south end of town where the pipeline would require blasting and pass close to businesses and the Merrimack Historical Society.

Once the meeting opened for public comment, a succession of residents came forward to air concerns.

Wendy Thomas said she was dismayed to see another version of the route. "I want to know in what universe it is appropriate to come into a town meeting to discuss a proposed route with a new route."

Debra Huffman asked Kinder Morgan to consider running the pipeline directly beneath the highway instead of cutting through residential areas. "This is the biggest investment some of these people have - their yards and their homes," said Huffman. She said the resulting easements would restrict how homeowners can enjoy their property.

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.

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=- 8 0 2 5 8 8 7 , 5 2 5 7 1 8 5 , - 7903588,5314972&basemap =BM&thematicmap=NED](http://www.mapgeo.com/nrpcnh/?extent=-8025887,5257185,-7903588,5314972&basemap=BM&thematicmap=NED).

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