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COVERSTORY

GATHERING STORM

As colder months approach, debate heats up over natural gas pipeline expansion



AP Photo

By DAVID WINZELBERG

Business groups and environmentalists are ratcheting up their rhetoric in the ongoing battle over a proposed expansion of a natural gas pipeline under New York Harbor.

Environmental advocates are looking to draw a line in the sand in opposing the \$1 billion underwater pipeline extension, arguing that the project is in conflict with the state's pledge to switch to renewable energy sources.

At the same time, business groups and developers maintain they are being hurt by National Grid's self-imposed moratorium on new natural gas customers, which the utility says it can't lift until the pipeline project is allowed to move forward.

At stake, opponents say, is the health of the environment, while supporters say killing the project threatens the region's economic wellbeing.

National Grid says the pipeline expansion, also known as the Northeast Supply Enhancement Project, would increase capacity in the area by 14 percent, delivering 400 million cubic feet of natural gas per day. The utility insists that without it, a natural gas shortage is likely this winter.

The project, a 24-mile expansion of the existing Williams-Transco pipeline, would run 17 miles underwater, stretching from New Jersey under New York Bay to another existing pipeline off the Rockaways. However, the state Department of Environmental Conservation denied the project's application in May, causing the utility to immediately impose a moratorium on new natural gas service.

"We put applications on hold since May 15 and we probably should have done it sooner than that," said Keith Rooney, director of community and customer management for National Grid.

Since then, the company has put 2,600 applications in limbo that represent 20,000 commercial, residential and multifamily units across downstate. Rooney said the new applications for natural gas service include nine Long Island school districts with more than 20 buildings.

The natural gas moratorium has stalled business expansions and new real estate developments across the Island. A new

business and civic group called the Long Island Main Street Alliance claims the natural gas ban has delayed housing projects and small business openings in downtown Farmingdale, Central Islip, Bellport, Baldwin, Lynbrook, Uniondale and Huntington Station.

Earlier this month, Stephen Wangel, president of the Lynbrook Chamber of Commerce, said that small business and the middle class have become collateral damage in the fight for the pipeline project.

"Because of this freeze on new service, restaurants can't get the needed gas supply to cook and heat their facilities," Wangel said. "This translates into vacant storefronts, loss of employment and desolate downtowns."

Developers decry the loss of certainty when planning how to heat new projects.

"We currently have 12 projects under construction and we're about to start half a dozen more and we don't know how we're going to heat them," said Jan Burman, a principal of Garden City-based Engel Burman Group.

"Some jobs may be delayed. For others, you may have to redesign the heating plant."

Last month, the Plumbing, Heating, Cooling Contractors of Long Island sent a letter to National Grid asking the utility to rescind its decision to not approve applications for new gas service until the state allows the pipeline project to move forward.

The trade group expressed understanding for concern about the environment, but pointed out that development on Long Island will come to a screeching halt without natural gas.

"This lack of activity will have a devastating impact on plumbers, suppliers, consumers and public safety, while the inability to install new gas service will impede construction (residential and commercial), business and industry growth, and corresponding jobs," the letter read. "It will also prevent compliance with new post-Sandy rules requiring that entities such as hospitals, gas sta-



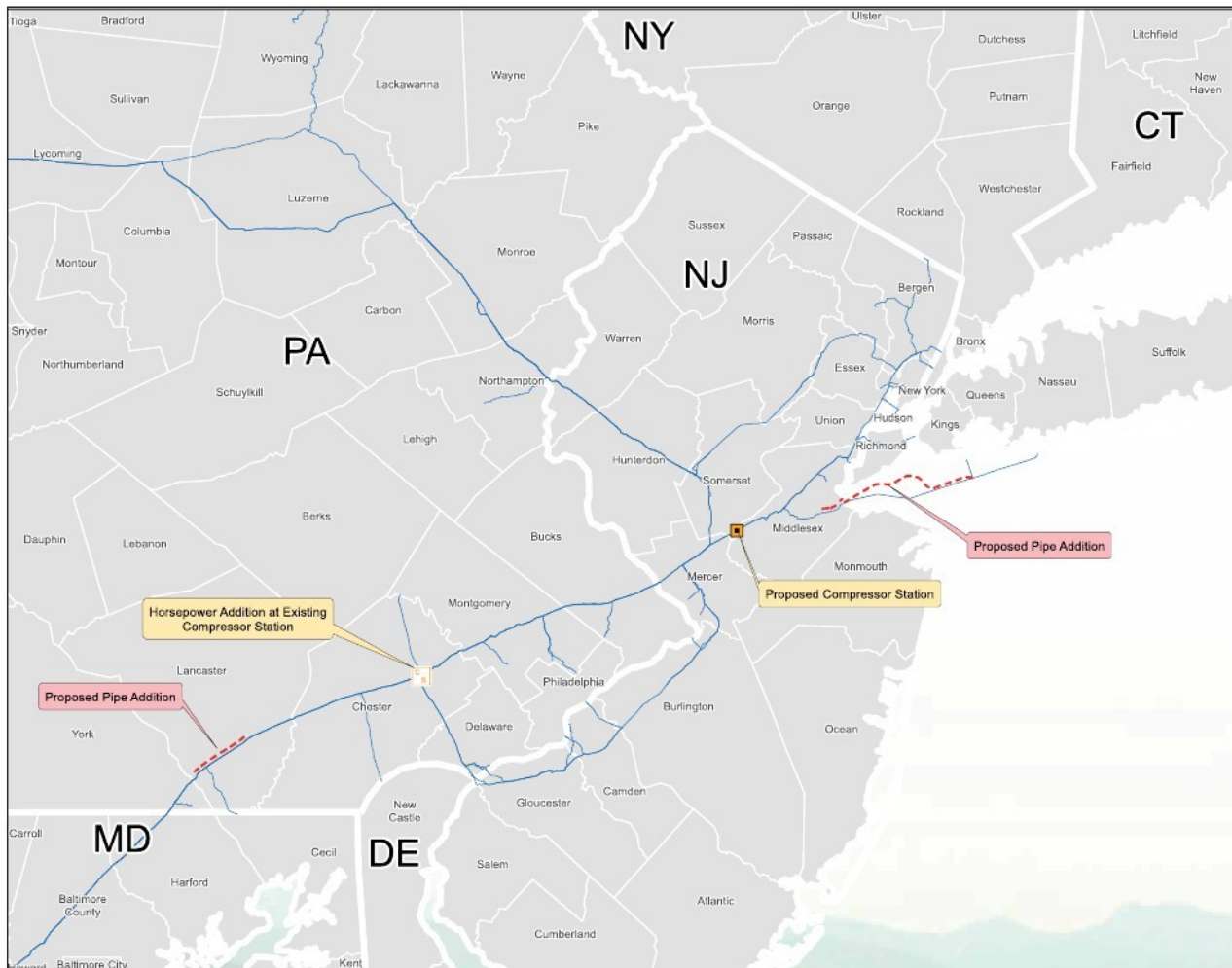
Photo courtesy of the Long Island Progressive Coalition

Opponents of the natural gas pipeline expansion rally outside the Rockville Centre office of State Sen. Todd Kaminsky.

tions and water districts have emergency standby gas generators. This problem will impact homeowners who will be unable to convert to or expand an existing use of natural gas service. It will also conflict with governmental priorities such as constructing affordable/workforce housing."

Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, said the natural gas moratorium is having a devastating effect on economic development here.

"Billions of dollars of pledged private and public funds earmarked for hundreds of projects in our region are at risk of being repurposed or allocated elsewhere should the moratorium continue," Strober said. "If no better solution can be achieved, the natural gas pipeline at least provides the resource and investor confidence needed to ensure critical economic development projects move forward while our region shifts toward more renew-



Courtesy of Williams-Transco

The proposed 24-mile extension would add a loop to the existing pipeline off the Rockaways.

able energy sources.”

However, opponents of the pipeline expansion say broadening the availability of fossil fuels like natural gas runs counter to the drive to convert to renewable energy sources.

Earlier this month, a group representing more than a dozen environmental and civic organizations rallied outside the office of State Sen. Todd Kaminsky, chair of the Senate environment committee. The group was lobbying for the DEC to deny construction permits for the NESE project.

Patrick Houston of New York Communities for Change, one of the opponents of the pipeline expansion, said his group won't be “fooled by false choices” he says are being foisted on the public by natural gas providers.

“We will not be manipulated by the fossil fuel industry and the utilities who want to continue business as usual,” Houston said in a written statement. “Because we know business as usual means Greenland melting. We know business as usual means another Hurricane Sandy.”

Lisa Tyson, director of the Long Island Progressive Coalition, points out that the state's recently enacted Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act commits New York to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors of the economy and requires 85 percent greenhouse gas emissions reductions by 2050.

“The proposed Williams-Transco NESE pipeline, which would transport fracked gas under New York Harbor, cannot be approved if Governor Andrew Cuomo is serious about the monumental legislation New York State just passed,” Tyson said in a written statement. “We cannot codify climate goals into law only to undermine those goals with further investment in fossil fuel infrastructure. We are at a crossroads and we cannot be of two minds in the era of the climate crisis.”

Rooney said National Grid agrees with the governor's plan. “We're in the middle of a transition into solar, wind and electric vehicles and renewable gas plants,” Rooney said.

The utility is partnering with New York City on a renewable gas plant by Newtown Creek in Greenpoint, Brooklyn that is slated to open on Dec. 1. The facility takes garbage and other waste and recycles it into enough natural gas to power over 1,000 homes. Rooney says it took eight years to get the project done.

“We would need 35 of those plants a year for the next 10 years to make up for what the NESE delivers,” he said. “We're doing everything we can to move to renewables. It takes time to get there. We need gas today.”

Burman agreed with that assessment.

“We don't have the renewables to run Long Island,” Burman

said. “Right now it's not there. If we're going to do any type of development, we need to know how we have fuel. Natural gas is the cleanest and best alternative.”

There aren't many options. In the absence of natural gas, developers of the \$1.3 billion Belmont Park arena/hotel/retail complex are instead considering the use of propane, electricity, or a combination of both. If propane is used, it would be stored in two 30,000-gallon underground tanks located on the south side of the proposed arena near Red Road, according to state documents.

If natural gas isn't available, propane is at least a viable stop-gap measure, according to Charles Buonincontri, market development director for Rye Brook, N.Y.-based Paraco, one of the area's largest suppliers of propane. Buonincontri says his firm has seen a bump in business over the last month from homeowners, builders and small businesses who've been stymied by National Grid's moratorium.

And it's prepared for more. Paraco has more than 500,000 gallons of propane on hand at its four Long Island facilities in Bay Shore, Bohemia, Riverhead and Shirley.

“Anyone in need of a natural gas system can use the propane on a temporary basis and then easily switch back to natural gas should they come back online,” Buonincontri said. “That is what makes this fuel so versatile. It has many similarities with natural gas and they can be switched between one another.”

Meanwhile, opponents of the pipeline expansion project, who say it would stir up toxins on the seafloor and threaten marine life, claim that companies like National Grid and Con Edison are overstating the need for increased supply of natural gas because of the rise of renewables and improvements in energy efficiency.

“Long Island is on the frontline of climate change,” said Tyson. “Our coastal communities are threatened by sea-level rise causing flooding and home damage, families are still recovering from the devastation of Superstorm Sandy, and our neighborhoods are overburdened with air pollution from fossil fuels, causing cancers and heart disease. Our vulnerability to current and future climate impacts makes the Williams pipeline completely untenable.”

Long Island is already serviced by two underwater natural gas pipelines. They are a Williams pipeline that goes into Long Beach and has been in operation since the 1950s, and an Iroquois Gas Transmission System pipeline from Canada that comes across Long Island Sound and feeds the LIPA power plant in Northport and then feeds a station called South Commack. That one came online in 1992.

Other underwater natural gas pipelines in the area make land in Manhattan, Staten Island and Brooklyn. Rooney says they've been operating safely for decades.



Photos by Judy Walker

LISA TYSON: 'Our vulnerability to current and future climate impacts makes the Williams pipeline completely untenable.'



JAN BURMAN: 'If we're going to do any type of development, we need to know how we have fuel.'

“We also have safety features to remotely shut these pipelines if there was ever an incident, but we've never had any incidents,” he said.

Rooney added that the area's need for more natural gas is very real and that natural gas is more environmentally friendly than other fossil fuels. He said the pipeline expansion's added capacity would displace 900,000 barrels of oil annually and is the equivalent of taking 500,000 cars off the road a year.

While the DEC denied the pipeline project application in May, it could eventually be approved if the company includes additional mitigation measures. Both sides are anxiously awaiting a ruling by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, which also has to approve the project.

Rooney says he is “cautiously optimistic” the pipeline expansion will happen.

“If this project doesn't go through, we're talking about all of Brooklyn, most of Queens, all of Nassau County and all of Suffolk County will be completely shut down for business as far as gas,” he said.