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Saturday morning meeting to give Hollis 14 chances to comment on pipeline plan

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HOLLIS – Expect a big turnout Saturday morning to consider a long, if single-minded, town warrant at a special meeting spurred by the possibility of a natural gas pipeline coming through town.

The meeting, set in Hollis-Brookline High School gymnasium to handle potentially huge crowds, will debate and vote on 14 warrant articles, all starting with the phrase “To see if the town of Hollis will vote to oppose approval by the New Hampshire Energy Facility Site Evaluation Committee to the construction and installation of a natural gas pipeline.”

The articles refer to a controversial natural gas pipeline proposed by Houston-based Kinder Morgan, the parent company of the Tennessee Natural Gas Company.

The meeting will begin at 9 a.m.

Each article gives a different reason for opposition, from a pipeline’s effect on groundwater and wildlife to concern about “rural character,” to its effect on the town tax base and the “economic uses” of conservation land “such as silviculture and agriculture,” as well as concerns about health and safety.

Whatever the crowd decides, the warrants are non-binding. Unlike warrants at regular town meetings, which have legal authority over the actions of selectmen and other officials, these have no legal basis.

They are designed to give the town an official voice on the most controversial topic in town, in hopes that it will sway state regulators in the future. It will be a surprise if the meeting doesn’t say “we oppose approval” 14 times over.

Since word of the gas pipeline proposal surfaced in the spring, it has been the subject of several public meetings in Hollis and in neighboring towns, and landowners and town officials have been overwhelmingly in opposition.

The wording of the articles comes from a variety of sources, including legal counsel hired by Hollis to advise the town on the complex process of pipeline approval, the selectmen, and suggestions at public hearings.

Hollis residents who are registered to vote can change the wording of any article. Each will be subject to a majority vote, by show of hands unless there is a motion from the floor to require a secret ballot.

It is extremely unusual, perhaps unique, for a special town meeting to consider more than a dozen articles about the same topic, none of which carry legal bearing or involve any expenditure.

Kinder Morgan wants to run a three-foot-diameter trunk line across northern Massachusetts, carrying natural gas from "fracked" fields in New York state to an existing facility in Dracut, Mass. It has also proposed a number of transmission lines, also buried, about a foot or less in diameter, carrying gas to transmission systems. One of them would start in Pepperell, Mass., and run north through Hollis to a Liberty Utilities site on Route 101A in Nashua, traversing a number of properties owned by Beaver Brook Association.

Kinder Morgan made a formal application to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on Sept. 16, kicking off a years-long regulatory process. Approval will also be needed from the state Site Evaluation Committee, which issues certificates for energy facilities including gas pipelines and some electric generating and transmission facilities.

Town Administrator Troy Brown has estimated that the cost of the special meeting would be from \$5,000 to \$8,000, covering things like sound equipment, legal notices and staff time of the town attorney and other paid workers.

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