

Kinder Morgan votes to move forward with 30-inch line

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Facing opposition from many cities and towns in the Northeast, Kinder Morgan has announced specifics about its plan to move forward with a controversial natural gas pipeline project in the region.

The Northeast Energy Direct Project, proposed by Tennessee Natural Gas, a Kinder Morgan subsidiary, calls for a 30-inch pipeline that would begin in New York State and make its way to a gas hub in Dracut. Earlier versions of Kinder Morgan's proposal left the possibility of a 36-inch pipeline open.

The company announced its board of directors voted to move forward with the smaller pipe, which will cost about \$3.3 billion, Thursday.

The Northeast Energy Direct Project is the combination of two pipelines -- one that travels from Pennsylvania to Wright, New York, and another that travels from there to Dracut. About 64 miles of the route would pass through Massachusetts and 71 miles would pass through New Hampshire.

An additional 60 miles of smaller pipelines branching off from the main line are also planned in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut.

The project's proponents peg it as a solution to a spike in energy costs in New England in recent years. Officials from Kinder Morgan have emphasized that the pipeline is designed to serve the Northeastern United States, while opponents have expressed fears the company aims to increase its capacity to sell energy overseas.

Groups opposing the pipeline, such as Dracut Pipeline Awareness, Methuen Pipeline Awareness, and Windham Residents Against the Pipeline, say the construction process will cause property damage and inconveniences, while the pipeline itself could pose a safety risk to communities with little to no reward.

Windham Residents Against the Pipeline secretary Gail Gumbel, whose property in Windham, N.H. falls along the route of the main pipeline, said she is not comforted by Kinder Morgan's decision to go with a 30-inch pipeline over a 36-inch pipeline. In addition to safety concerns, she expressed doubt that the region's energy costs will go down.

"I still think with the 30-inch pipeline, (export) is a big concern. They have the ability to ship this gas to Canada ... and sell it overseas," she said. "We're polluting our own environment to get this

gas, and if it's sold overseas, the United States is going to be competing with international markets. We're going to be competing for our own gas."

Even if the pipeline did have a positive impact on electricity rates, she said, it wouldn't matter in Windham, where most residents use oil or wood stoves.

"We just don't have the infrastructure," she said. Nor does Pelham, N.H., another community the pipeline is slated to cut through, Gumbel said.

The vote by Kinder Morgan's board on the pipe's diameter solidifies one detail of many that have been in flux about the project, including its exact route through the region. Presently, the company is working within a 400-foot wide "study corridor" to determine the placement of the offshoot lines that will run beneath Merrimack Valley communities.

The route could twist and turn within that 400 feet to avoid problem areas like conservation land, wetlands and historically significant sites. Kinder Morgan representatives have also said they will meet with individual property owners effected by the project to discuss their concerns.

Some local officials hope that by going on the record with their opposition, they can convince Kinder Morgan to bypass their community altogether. Last week, the Methuen City Council unanimously passed a resolution describing the pipeline as "bringing into question the safety of the citizens of Methuen" and "unfair to Methuen residents."

The Andover Board of Selectmen also drafted a letter to Congresswoman Niki Tsongas urging her to approach the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the body with the final say over whether Kinder Morgan's project gets built.

In the letter, they request that the commission delay an upcoming meeting in Dracut until the latest version of Kinder Morgan's plan is available. An updated report is expected in the coming weeks.

Rich Cowan, a Dracut-based consultant who has presented on alternative sources of natural gas at public meetings all over the region, said Kinder Morgan's choice to move forward with the smaller pipeline reflects a lack of demand for natural gas.

"I think Kinder Morgan is trying to make lemonade out of lemons. They wanted to go for a 2.2 billion cubic foot pipeline and they haven't had enough customers to build the size of the pipeline that they want," he said.

Cowan said he believes that growing alternative energy usage in New England, combined with other pipeline projects and expanding the capacity of existing pipelines, negates the need for Kinder Morgan's project locally. He said he foresees the company using the pipeline to send gas to other parts of the world.

"In the month of June, wholesale electricity prices were at record lows," Cown said. "We're talking about having record low electricity prices for nine months out of the year already, and the changes you need to extend that to the other three months do not require that you build a giant pipeline."