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Editorial: Sales pitches tool up on need for natural gas pipeline

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Every campaign season, interests from outside Massachusetts pony up to buy messages that mold public opinion. It is the American way in modern politics and it isn't limited to issues decided on Election Day. Some campaigns, like the effort to build a new pipeline across Massachusetts, face different deadlines.

Pipelines connect dots on a map. Before taking on faith messages from a new campaign called the Coalition to Lower Energy Costs, residents should connect some other dots. Here are two:

■ Anthony Buxton. He is the Maine lawyer and lobbyist now serving as spokesman and general counsel for the coalition.

■ Kinder Morgan is another dot. That is the company behind the Tennessee Gas Pipeline that seeks federal permission to carry fracked natural gas across the state and through Plainfield and nine towns in Franklin County.

Can we connect those dots? Yes. Buxton represents the Tennessee Gas Pipeline in Maine, where it is making a case to the Maine Public Utility Commission for the need for more pipeline capacity. He also lobbies for an outfit called the Industrial Energy Consumer Group made up of large power users. As Richie Davis of the Recorder reported, Kinder Morgan confirms it is helping to pay for the coalition's media campaign.

Two more dots:

■ National Grid, one of two major utilities serving the area, will increase costs to consumers by 37 percent next week, citing higher energy costs driven in part by an inability to bring enough natural gas to generating plants.

■ Well, this dot has two pieces: The coalition's name, and one of its first messages about energy costs, as outlined by Buxton: "If we show consumers that there will be relief down the road, then that makes it a bit easier to make plans for now and the next couple of years."

On that, there is a bit of a disconnect. The Tennessee Gas Pipeline is projected to cost $4 billion to $5 billion. It would be financed in part by placing a special rate tariff on electricity customers.

Let's put those dots together: The coalition wants to help energy consumers lower costs in the long term by building a pipeline that will raise their costs.

Kathryn Eiseman of Cummington, a lawyer and executive director of the Massachusetts PipeLine Awareness Network, cites evidence that new natural gas supplies arriving in the Northeast would be sold globally, where prices are higher. She believes a new pipeline could increase costs in New England.

One of Buxton's clients is the New England State Committee on Electricity, which has advocated for bringing new gas supplies to the region through the addition of pipelines. Massachusetts is represented on that panel, but the state pulled out of lock step in August when Gov. Deval Patrick said he was skeptical of the Kinder Morgan pipeline. State officials are taking a fresh look at the state's power needs due to the closing of coal and nuclear plants.

That information is a critical piece of the puzzle. At the same time, a competing pipeline is on the horizon in a proposal from Northeast Utilities and Spectra Energy Corp. of Houston that would use existing coastal pipeline routes rather than cross environmentally sensitive areas.

If it is true that New England's energy future depends on natural gas, in part because of the welcome retirement of coal-fired plants, expanding pipeline capacity may be needed. But an assessment of costs to consumers must be made by independent parties, not by those with a financial interest in the outcome, like members of the Coalition to Lower Energy Costs.

Is the coalition a front for the natural gas industry? Buxton answered that question this way: "We represent groups of people absolutely desperate for natural gas. Kinder Morgan just happens to be one of the companies that can provide part of the solution." The coalition plans to spend "several hundreds of thousands of dollars" to air 30-second spots. There is one connection that won't be disclosed to energy customers who hear those ads. It would sound something like this: "We're Kinder Morgan and we approved this message."