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Pipeline's NH route moves to top choice

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Seventeen New Hampshire towns in three counties are in the path of a major gas pipeline project, after developers decided to shift their plans north amid mounting opposition from state and local officials in northern Massachusetts.

An official with Kinder Morgan, the company looking to build the 36-inch pipeline across southern New Hampshire, now says the Granite State route - previously referred to as a "possible alternative" to the route across upper portions of the Bay State - is now the "preferred" option for the controversial Northeast Energy Direct Route project.

"We plan on or around Dec. 8 to file an amended resource report that will identify the New Hampshire power line corridor as our primary route," said Allen Fore, vice president of public affairs for Kinder Morgan. "The early analysis from the available data and aerial surveillance is this looks like a very viable and preferable route for us. That's why we are moving towards a

formal reference to this plan when we amend our report in December."

The 36-inch-wide pipeline would span 80.03 miles across southern New Hampshire, according to Kinder Morgan filings. Of that route, 72.21 miles would sit in existing Public Service of New Hampshire rights-of-way, following the path of power transmission lines - while 7.82 more miles would need to be acquired by the company. The pipeline would be built by Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co., a subsidiary of Texas-based Kinder Morgan. The proposed route starts in northern Massachusetts, enters the Granite State in Winchester and stretches across the southern tier of the state through 17 communities, including Milford, Merrimack, Londonderry, Litchfield and Pelham.

It's an alternative route for a pipeline the company proposed to build across northern Massachusetts. The company outlined its plans for that route last year, but faced significant pushback from residents, town officials and legislators.

"The route discussed in Massachusetts is part of our original filing, and still on the table," said Fore. "What our planned filing in December will do is identify the New Hampshire route as our primary route and allow us to begin to zero in on this route, examine the terrain associated with it and open dialogues with the communities along it."

The pipeline, which will cost an estimated \$2.8 billion and is scheduled to open in 2018, would cross 155 wetlands in the Granite State and 116 bodies of water, including 18 major rivers and about 8 miles of state forest or parks, according to filings made earlier this month with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The filings do not specify exactly where the wetlands, forest or rivers are and also doesn't say how many residential properties would be affected.

Fore and others associated with Kinder Morgan, the third largest energy company in North America and the driving force behind the pipeline, sat down with a reporter from the New Hampshire Sunday News last week to discuss the project, detailing the preferred route and benefits to the state in terms of jobs and taxes collected - while also boosting the supply of natural gas to the state. "We are in the process of starting a dialogue with the towns, meeting

with government officials and some of the appropriate resource agencies," said Fore. "No permits have been filed for, no formal discussions with the state have been held. Those will come."

Officials in several communities along the route said Friday that they were surprised to learn this has become the "preferred route" for the company, because in many cases the company had only recently made its initial attempts at scheduling discussions on the pipeline (see related story, Page A7).

Pipeline supporters say it will relieve demand for natural gas in New England, at a time when consumers are getting hit with increases in gas bills attributed, in part, to a lack of transmission lines.

The proposed pipeline's opponents say natural gas contributes to climate change and want the state to explore renewable energy alternatives. They also say the project would lower property values for homes located near the route. Fore said estimates put the total taxes that would be collected statewide in the first year after the project goes into service at \$16.8 million. Of that, Fore said \$11.1 million would be property taxes paid to communities along the route and an estimated \$5.7 million in local school taxes paid to the state and distributed to school districts. Fore also highlighted the jobs he believes the project would bring to the state.

"We estimate a total of 520 temporary jobs will be needed to construct the New Hampshire portion of NHD," said Fore. Jobs would include construction contractors, pipeline traffic controllers and security positions. "Kinder Morgan would increase the head count of workers in New Hampshire as well, to serve the new infrastructure in the state," said Fore. He estimated three jobs would be added to the Kinder Morgan in-state roster.

"But really, the biggest opportunity is expansion of gas delivery to the state. Basically now, east of Milford there isn't gas available. This could provide that opportunity, the possibility of enhancing and growing gas delivery to New Hampshire."

A spokesman for Gov. Maggie Hassan said she is interested in identifying ways to increase the supply of natural gas in New Hampshire. "Rising energy costs have been a long-standing challenge for our state and region, with recent winter price spikes due in large part to a lack of natural gas pipeline capacity," said William Hinkle, a Hassan spokesman, in a statement.

"Since entering office, Gov. Hassan has focused on working with her fellow New England governors to explore ways to bring more natural gas and new, renewable energy sources into the state, and she is encouraged by the private sector's recent efforts to bring additional natural gas into our region. The governor believes that we can pursue new energy projects that will reduce energy costs while protecting our natural resources, meeting siting requirements, and incorporating the views of our communities."

Liberty Utilities, New Hampshire's largest natural gas distributor, signed an agreement Nov. 5 to buy gas carried by the new pipeline. No financial details were announced. Under the terms of the agreement, Liberty will buy up to 115,000 dekatherms a day of natural gas, enough for up to 65,000 homes, the company said in a release. Liberty currently has 87,000 customers in New Hampshire.

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