

Untitled document

Lawmakers oppose its current form

By Tara Ballenger

The Concord Monitor, April 9, 2011

Sen. Kelly Ayotte and Rep. Charlie Bass announced their opposition to the Northern Pass power project yesterday in a letter that urged the Department of Energy to look at alternative options for the plan.

The opposition is considered a step in the right direction by citizens and environmental advocacy groups who continue to galvanize public opinion against the project. Meanwhile, the utilities behind Northern Pass reaffirmed their commitment to collaborate with everyone involved in the project.

The project would bring 1,200 megawatts of hydroelectricity from the Canadian border to Deerfield through 180 miles of high-voltage direct- and alternating-current power lines, and has caused residents across the state to voice opposition at public hearings, local meetings and grassroots rallies.

The strong public sentiment led Republicans Ayotte and Bass to announce their opposition, according to a joint press release issued yesterday.

The letter, which was sent to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy, gave further explanation:

"We are deeply concerned that this project's proposed route could irreparably damage the North Country - forever changing the face of one of the last unspoiled areas in this part of the country. Protecting one of the region's prime economic assets and pristine landscapes outweighs any possible benefits of the currently proposed project."

It went on to suggest that the department investigate the feasibility of burying the transmission lines or building the lines only in existing rights of way.

The utilities proposing the \$1.1 billion Northern Pass project say it would provide clean hydroelectricity to New England and hundreds of jobs and millions of tax dollars to New Hampshire.

Northern Pass, LLC is made up of Connecticut-based Northeast Utilities (the parent company of Public Service of New Hampshire) and Boston-based NSTAR. They are being paid by the Canadian utility Hydro-Quebec to complete the project.

It's not the first letter that members of Congress have submitted to the department. Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Ayotte sent a letter in March asking the department to investigate a potential conflict of interest with the contractor hired to gather and analyze scientific information

needed for the permitting of the project, and Shaheen, Ayotte and Bass all signed a letter earlier this week seeking an extension of the public comment period so that people across the state would have enough time to voice their question and concerns about the project.

Shaheen's signature was absent from yesterday's strongly-worded letter, however.

"I have concerns about the project and remain committed to ensuring that all alternatives are thoroughly considered and everyone is treated fairly during the environmental review process," Shaheen said yesterday in a statement in response to the letter.

A spokeswoman for Shaheen said that her concern lies with possible environmental and economic effects.

Along with Shaheen, Rep. Frank Guinta and Gov. John Lynch are other elected officials acknowledging concerns of constituents but not voicing official support or opposition for the project.

In a conference call with journalists yesterday, Lynch reiterated his position that the project needs support of New Hampshire communities if it will be successful.

"I've been very clear that I think Public Service of New Hampshire needs to get the support of the people of the North Country in order for this project to go forward," Lynch said. He added that investigating other options - such as burying the lines or placing them in existing rights of way - may be a discussion the utilities could have with opponents.

A spokesperson for Guinta said that the Manchester Republican is aware of the project, but wants to wait until the Department of Energy has received all public comment before he takes a position.

In response to the opposition, a spokesman for Northern Pass issued a statement via a blog post to the project's website. It emphasized the potential economic benefits to the state and promised to continue to collaborate with local residents and leaders.

"We appreciate the comments offered by Senator Ayotte and Congressman Bass, and we look forward to continuing to work with them to address their concerns with the initial proposal as this project moves forward," the blog post read.

Jack Savage, spokesman for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, an environmental advocacy group that has pushed for the Department of Energy to consider all options for the project, including the option to not build, said he was pleased with the letter.

"They are responding not only to what makes sense to them, but what they are hearing from constituents," Savage said. "There may not be a place in the technical permitting process to acknowledge public opinion, but it matters."