

County Commissioners Question Sabal Pipeline Officials, Criticize Survey Crews

By Terry Witt
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Officials from the Sabal Trail Pipeline and Spectra Energy were peppered with safety questions Tuesday by Levy County Commissioners who invited them to the board meeting for a public grilling.

Florida Power and Light has given the contract to Spectra Energy Corporation and NextEra Energy Inc. to build a 474-mile natural gas pipeline from northern Alabama to Orlando, passing through Gilchrist and eastern Levy County on the way.

Survey crews have been busy in Levy County for months choosing the proposed route for the pipeline and establishing flags along the corridor, often on private property, and often without good manners, according to Commissioner Danny Stevens.

Stevens said a number of people have told him about how the survey crews were disrespectful when residents attempted to ask them questions about the pipeline and where it would be built. "It appears those surveyors are not people friendly," Stevens said.

The survey has been completed and Stevens said it is probably too late to do anything to correct the bad attitudes of the survey crews, but he wanted Brian Fahrenthold, director of governmental affairs for the pipeline project, to report the behavior to his bosses in the company.

Fahrenthold said the type of behavior described by Stevens is not tolerated by the companies that would build the pipeline.

"I will take that back; that there's been quite a bit of disrespect," Fahrenthold said.

The pipeline will pass a few miles west of Bronson and cut southeast below Williston on its way to the Orlando area.

Attorney Brian Bolves, hired by the county commission to represent them, said the energy companies will cut a 100-foot wide swath through Levy County to create a corridor for the pipeline. He said there will be impacts.

Commissioner Mike Joyner asked what it would take to kill the project that runs through his entire district and has generated complaints by constituents, although he said he knows the pipeline is coming and there's no way to stop it.

Fahrenthold suggested Joyner attend scoping meetings in the near future. Residents can voice concern or support for the project at the scoping meetings and their comments become part of the official record for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to consider.

The nearest scoping meeting is at 6 p.m. at Bell High School on Tuesday, March 25. There is also a scoping meeting at 6 p.m. at the Live Oak City Hall on Monday, March 24. The other scoping meeting that is reasonably close will take place at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, March 26 at the Rainbow Springs Country Club in Dunnellon.

Scoping meetings are open to the public and anyone can comment.

Joyner asked if the Sabal Trail project would provide a four-wheel drive emergency medical vehicle for the county to reach remote spots along the pipeline while it is being constructed when someone is injured. He said most of the land is sandy and the county ambulances wouldn't be able to reach them.

Susan Waller of Spectra Energy made no promises but said the company would be in close contact with the county and its 1st responders to make sure they have the training and equipment necessary to respond to emergencies.

Farhenthold, responding to a question from resident Renata Cannon about how the companies would respond to emergencies if there was a leak, said the pipeline temperature and pressure are monitored remotely from Houston, Texas. He suggested the company would know if there is a leak and could remotely shut off valves within seconds.

It was not clear from his answers whether Spectra Energy and NextEra Energy would have their own crews within a short distance to respond to emergencies, but they said those plans will be firmed up if they win final approval and get closer to the start of construction. He said the plan is to complete the pipeline by 2017. The pipeline will carry 1 billion cubic feet of highly pressurized natural gas daily to corporate customers in south and south central Florida, and Duke Energy in Citrus County.