



# Country club's power line fight goes to court

May 1, 2012 12:00 am

By Paula Reed Ward / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A 7.8-mile stretch of power transmission lines is at the center of a court battle in Allegheny County this week.

Duquesne Light -- which has easements all along the route from the Highland substation in East Liberty to the Logans Ferry substation in Plum -- claims that the required upgrade from a 69,000-volt line to a 345,000-volt line will ensure that customers in the area do not lose power during peak operating times in the summer.

But Longue Vue Club, a country club founded in 1920 on 370 acres set above the Allegheny River in Penn Hills, claims that the 150-foot poles that will be used to carry the line will negatively impact the view from its facilities, and that the utility company had alternative routes that could have been used to avoid the problem.

Further, the attorney for Longue Vue claims that the 1949 easements Duquesne Light has on the property do not cover the new construction of two access roads for the project and therefore it is not a permitted use.

Duquesne Light started the process for the upgraded transmission line in 2009 and sent letters to all of the affected property owners, spokesman Joey Vallarian said. The state Public Utility Commission signed off on Duquesne Light's plan in February 2011.

Longue Vue did not raise any concerns about the project until three months later.

Duquesne Light filed the complaint against Longue Vue, being heard by Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Christine A. Ward, in March after the company sent a construction crew out to start doing work to the road but found themselves locked off the property.

The project is slated to be completed by November, but work on the 67-pole project has been stalled based on the dispute with Longue Vue.

"All but 11 of them are erected, strung with cable and ready to be electrified," said James F. Boyle, the senior project manager for Duquesne Light.

Of those 11 poles, two are planned for Longue Vue's property, he said.

The two entities are in contention over whether a third pole would sit on Longue Vue's property. That pole, known as No. 6726, if constructed would obstruct the view from Longue Vue's Pink Terrace outdoor dining area.

Duquesne Light claims it is not on Longue Vue's land, and that the company has had two separate property surveys completed that show that.

"The pole is not on Longue Vue's property. I am absolutely positive," Mr. Boyle said.

Without the judge's approval, he continued, "We will have a transmission line with two gaps in it, and, obviously, that transmission line will be nonfunctional."

The 69,000-volt line that has been in service since 1927 and 1953 has already been taken out of service and demolished.

Megan Sullivan, the manager of transmission planning, told Judge Ward that Duquesne Light is upgrading the transmission lines based on a 2004 reliability study.

"We had significantly low voltage in the 69kv [line]," she said. "With the loss of one line, another line would overload."

Because of that, she said, the whole northeast section of the area would be "in trouble" in the next several years.

On July 22, in the middle of a heat wave, Ms. Sullivan said the system was very close to reaching peak capacity. Had just one power-generating plant experienced a shutdown, Duquesne Light's dispatchers would have had to start cutting off power to its customers.

Compounding that problem, she said, is that a power station in Elrama will be deactivated on June 1.

One of the central issues in the fight with Longue Vue Club is the height of the poles Duquesne Light is using.

"Longue Vue has a strong historical and esthetic interest in preserving the unobstructed view of the Allegheny River Valley, for which it was named and which constitutes a material part of the value of its property," wrote Kenneth Yarsky, who represents the club.

He claims the poles would "cause incalculable harm to defendant by destroying the unobstructed view and interfering with use of defendant's skeet shooting range."

The transmission lines were formerly held by H-frame poles that were approximately 80 feet high.

The new monopoles are about 150 feet tall.

"Because of the higher voltage, we needed greater clearance from surrounding structures and vegetation," Mr. Boyle said. "Lowering the poles and widening the right of way was considered not feasible."

To use the lower, H-frame poles, he continued, would have required the right of way to be 80 to 90 feet wider, which would have required gaining easements from 15 to 20 additional property owners.

Mr. Boyle said on cross-examination that the power company used an objective system to rank a number of routes for the transmission lines, but the already existing one ranked the highest.

"Obviously, it's going to be one of the premier routes through the area," he said.

Among the less-preferred routes was one that would have required that the pole foundations be built under the Allegheny River, and others that would have required additional acres of forestry to be cleared, Mr. Boyle said.

"This whole area on both sides of the river is a well-known landslide area."

The hearing before Judge Ward will continue today. She is expected to make a decision shortly thereafter.

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First Published 2012-05-01 04:19:40