

Power Push: Learning From N.H.'s First HVDC Power Line

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While the Northern Pass is one of the most controversial energy proposals in recent New Hampshire history, it is not the first such project to come to the Granite State. Another power line, called Phase II, stretches from Monroe New Hampshire down to the Massachusetts border. Driving through Hopkinton today you can't miss the three-tower-wide power line corridor that streaks through the town.

But they were a surprise to many residents 25 years ago, when they were installed.

"It was just days and days of these gigantic helicopters bringing the towers in. and I had no idea what was happening," remembers realtor Joanie McIntire who was living in town and the time, and still sells many houses in Hopkinton.

She and fellow realtor Judy Hampe took me for a drive along Phase II, a High Voltage Direct Current power line that passes through the town, and connects Canada's massive hydro-power dams to New England. Back in the 1980s Neither McIntire nor Hampe had heard about the line, not even when push-back in the North Country meant relocating the first section of the line, called Phase I, into Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

"It just seems to me like all the sudden there were just big power lines coming through, and I wasn't happy about it. I remember thinking maybe there should have been a little more controversy," says Hampe.

A Different Time, A Different Tactic

In the last 25 years, the prospect that a new power line could avoid controversy has decidedly shrunk.

There are important differences between Phase II, which is owned by National Grid, and the Northern Pass, proposed by Public Service of New Hampshire, and its parent company Northeast Utilities. For starters, Phase II was built almost entirely on existing rights of way, and between two other power lines, whereas PSNH will have to cut 40 miles of new right-of-way, and widen much of the existing corridor. Also the towers tend to be shorter; around 85 feet tall, though some are taller.

But there are historical echoes between the two projects, too.

“You have to understand the environment at the time,” says Peter Brown an energy lawyer with Preti-Flaherty who represented the state’s concerns when Phase II was up for consideration. “There was a consistent fear about dependency on foreign oil, and we had in New England in particular had suffered of the oil embargo because we were oil dependent for our generating assets.”

In 2014 it’s not oil dependence everyone’s talking about – it’s concerns over climate change, and the region’s use of natural gas for more than 50 percent of its energy.

“Time is of the essence, time is of the essence,” says the head of the Northern Pass Gary Long, “We expect problems this winter. The Independent System Operator of New England is worried there won’t be enough fuel to make electricity this winter, because of the heavy dependence on natural gas.”

But despite similarities in the energy markets Northern Pass has generated a much more staunch opposition, which has bought up easements to block the route, put up signs all over the state, and turned out en masse to important votes at the Statehouse.

The Northern Pass fight looks more like the drawn-out battle over the Seabrook nuclear power plant. This has led some observers to predict that Northern Pass will be okayed over objectors – just like Seabrook – and erected all along the length of the state, just like Phase II, to carry even more hydro-power into the state.

“The likelihood is that the project will be approved, notwithstanding its opposition,” says Brown, “Why would the SEC say anything but ‘OK, make sure you don’t put a tower in the middle of this brook’ or ‘watch out for an endangered species over here’ or ‘don’t go along a famous ridgeline in the White Mountain National Forest’? If you do all that, you’re on your own.”

The SEC is the Site Evaluation Committee, a 15-member group made up of state bureaucrats that evaluates energy proposals. When Phase II came before this body in 1985, the opposition was focused on the uncertain health impacts of living near a high-voltage transmission line.

Brown says he remembers one North Country farmer at a hearing in Colebrook standing up before a room full of utility executives to declare, “I don’t want my tractor starting up when I’m not on it.”

But ultimately these types of concerns weren’t convincing. “The arguments they gave were not persuasive enough in Phase II to cause the project to be denied,” says Bruce

Ellsworth, a now-retired New Hampshire utility regulator who sat on the SEC during Phase II.

And the evidence of health impacts hasn't exactly piled up since that power line was approved.

Adjudicating Ugly

But most opponents to Northern Pass have shifted to a different focus – the aesthetics of the towers themselves – and on that front there is precedent.

Last spring the SEC gave a thumbs down to a small wind farm proposed for a ridge of low hills in the town of Antrim. The decision makers said the enormous turbines would appear “out of scale,” and cause “significant qualitative impacts.”

“It was the aesthetics they found to be dispositive,” says Amy Manzelli, an attorney with BCM Environmental and Land Law who represented opponents of the wind farm. In other words, the Antrim decision shows it might be convincing to argue before the SEC that steel-lattice towers passing through the White Mountains or the woods of the North Country would be too big an impact.

“It's not an automatic yes. When you go before the Site Evaluation Committee, they do – and perhaps over-do – consideration of every aspect of the law,” says Manzelli.

Standing on Shifting Ground

But while it's no sure thing that Northern Pass will make it through the SEC, the biggest threat to the project may not come from bureaucrats, but politicians.

In September, Governor Hassan wrote an editorial to the Boston Globe in which she proclaimed, “exploring new energy sources like large-scale hydro power does not mean just accepting what Northern Pass has offered.”

And on the other side of the aisle there's State Senator Jeb Bradley. He has a long history of working out deals with PSNH on thorny issues, but if his rhetoric about the utility is any indication of the broader sentiment at the State House, the project may be standing on quicksand.

“Northern Pass is not headed toward the finish line, they're not even at the starting gate at this point,” he said in an interview this fall.

Northern Pass is just one of several open fronts between the Legislature and the utility. Its competitors want regulators to force Public Service to sell its power plants, and they want to block it from getting paid back for a \$422 million dollar scrubber

on a power plant in Bow. And lawmakers like Bradley are watching the fight closely, weighing their options.

“The debate about the scrubber is making people like me test their hypothesis that it’s too expensive to bury the lines,” he says, “I don’t buy it, I don’t buy their argument that it’s too expensive when they were off by almost a factor of seven-fold in terms of estimating the cost of electricity would be on the scrubber.”

In the coming weeks the House of Representatives will vote on a bill that would direct the SEC to automatically consider transmission lines that aren’t buried to have an unreasonable impact. It stands a fair chance of getting passed, and if it does it would seriously hurt Northern Pass’ chances with the SEC.

PSNH says that could also sink \$1.4 billion in construction spending, 1,200 construction jobs and \$28 million per year in local, county and state tax revenue. Not to mention the potential carbon reductions for the region from importing more hydro-power.

Even PSNH’s Gary Long seems to admit the project stands on shifting ground.

“We wouldn’t be proposing this project if we didn’t think it had public benefits and public merit,” he says, “But is it a certainty? No, not by any means.”

But if Northern Pass, in some form or another, is eventually constructed, what then? That’s what will look at tomorrow. Would we get used to it? Would the fears of opponents of the project be realized?