

Crossing Wires

Efforts to protect the agricultural landscapes of Columbia County from proliferating power lines are now a statewide concern

by Ann Morrow on March 6, 2014 Metroland

Columbia County is widely famed for the beauty of its bucolic farmland, historic houses, and verdant Hudson Valley vistas. These vistas, and the county's identity—its most important activities are agriculture and tourism—could be adversely impacted by a proposed 11.1-mile high-voltage power line that would run through the town of Ghent, bisecting multigenerational farmsteads and woods and streams, and marring the region's picturesque viewshed. It would intrude on Art Omi's 150-acre public sculpture park, and detract from a house dating to 1760. The 115-kilowatt transmission line would also require an unknown number of towers throughout the area. A grassroots advocacy group, Protect Ghent, was formed in opposition to the power line in 2012, when New York State Electric and Gas first proposed it.

On Feb. 25, local efforts to preserve the scenic rural character of Ghent went statewide when the Preservation League of New York State announced the addition of the historic and cultural resources of Columbia County to its 2014 Seven to Save list. The annual list designates the most threatened properties in the state. Preservation League president Jay Lorenzo made the announcement at a conference held at Omi International Arts Center, which is situated amid rolling hills and fruit orchards.

The meeting included state representatives and local residents; the director of the Columbia County Land Conservancy; Koethi Zan, executive director of Protect Ghent; and Erin Tobin, the league's regional director for technical and grant programs.

"The power line goes through Ghent, but there are other areas under threat from power-line development," said Tobin of designating the entire county. "We are working with Protect Ghent to develop resources for them, and for the other communities that are facing similar fights. The purpose is to get utility companies and developers to consider historic landscapes in their proposals. The [Ghent] power line will cut straight through a very important agricultural landscape."

Among the other towns that may be facing intrusive high-voltage lines are Claverack, Stuyvesant, and Clermont.

“Protect Ghent is a high-capacity, high-functioning advocacy community group,” said Tobin. “They’re very well organized and doing a wonderful job of bringing together a broad coalition, with public officials from the local level to the Federal level. We’re looking to highlight their work, and to put a spotlight on whether there is a viable alternative out there.”

According to a press release, the league’s Seven to Save designation delivers technical assistance and targeted support, opens the door to grant assistance, mobilizes local organizations, and fosters media and public awareness.

“This designation highlights how valuable our historic and cultural assets are—not just to us but to the state as a whole,” said Zan.

The purpose of the Columbia County Transmission Project is to serve as an additional corridor for backup power between upstate power producers and downstate consumers. According to NYSEG’s website, the project would avert voltage collapse in its system and enhance reliable electricity service for about 10,000 customers by bringing in a new source of electricity. The new transmission line will also require a new switching station in Ghent, occupying about two acres, and new rights of way, some of them running through public conservation areas including wildlife sanctuaries and a thoroughbred horse and cattle farm.

The increased attention to local advocacy seems to be working, however: The Public Service Commission has devised a low-voltage alternative plan that would utilize existing transmission routes and run along regular-height poles. NYSEG is citing increased costs for the alternate plan, and both proposals are under ongoing review.

If implemented, NYSEG’s project is expected to decrease forest cover, disturb wetlands, and possibly reduce farm-production capabilities (certainly a direct threat to locavores from New York City to the Capital Region).

“The proposed placement of lines affects the turning radius of farm equipment and can render fields unusable,” explained Zan. “Proposed locations for the switching stations would eliminate essential hayfields.”

The lines also would have a negative impact on historic buildings by ruining the view of them, and the view from them. Over a hundred historic houses and structures are within a one-mile radius of the lines, Zan said, including a National Register-eligible historic district. In addition, running lines along field ridges makes them visible to other towns and farmlands. "Protecting the viewshed, that is enough," said Tobin.

Though the area is renowned for its spectacular views of the Catskill and Berkshire mountains, "This isn't about 'Oh isn't it pretty,'" Tobin added. "This is about the historic resources of agricultural communities, and maintaining the integrity of these agricultural communities."

According to Daniel Mackay, the preservation league's director of public policy, the impact of NYSEG's proposal is not just aesthetic; it also could have substantial consequences on real-estate prices and economic investments based on unique community character.

Mackay also explained that the immediate 34.5 kilowatt project in Ghent is a precursor to a larger transmission proposal targeting central and eastern New York.

"The issues in Ghent are indicative of the types of impacts that will result from even longer and taller transmission lines proposed as part of [Gov. Cuomo's] energy superhighway proposal," he explained, a proposal that may result in a number of Hudson River Valley communities being faced with land acquisitions and even land seizures by eminent domain.

A decision on NYSEG's transmission project and PSC's submission for a less-intrusive, lower-voltage alternative is expected in April, and advocates for historic Columbia County are cautiously optimistic. However, a basic question that needs to be asked, said Mackay, "is why do utility companies seek to continue to build utility grids in the 21st-century with 20th-century technology? Where is the innovation, such as more efficient cables, or underground lines, that are in use in other locations?"