

With Power Comes Ambivalence

By **PENELOPE GREEN** MAY 14, 2014 New York Times



Power lines already crisscross the Hudson River Valley, but some residents are worried about plans to upgrade them. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

LIVINGSTON, N.Y. — It took Andrea Tranchita and her husband, Paul, a few decades to fully build out their pine-and-spruce-planked handmade house here. For the first six months, the couple and their two young daughters lived in a tent on the 10 acres of farmland that Ms. Tranchita's parents gave them as a wedding present in 1970. But now Ms. Tranchita, 63, a third-generation farmer who grows lavender and herbs and raises sheep, alpaca, llamas and Angora rabbits on this patch of land, is worried about her ability to continue to maintain it.

One recent drizzly morning, the sheep, newly shorn and wearing smart canvas coats, bumped a visitor and gummed her notebook, searching for the second-cutting hay that Ms. Tranchita had brought them as a treat. At the back of the paddock, two transmission towers straddled the tiny farm like giant steel sentries. Glancing up at the lines, Ms. Tranchita said that when the power comes through, "The hair on your arms stands on end. If you stand right here, and hold a fluorescent light bulb in your hand, it will light. If they triple the voltage, as they said they would, there's no way I can keep animals underneath. And if the poles widen, I'll lose the field and we'll go out of business."



Jim Joseph, a weekender, restored house in the Hudson River Valley. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

There are more than 11,000 miles of transmission lines in New York State, running from east to west and north to south upon a latticework of steel transmission towers like those on Ms. Tranchita's farm. Whether you consider them a blight or a boon, or a bit of both, they represent a system that's been in place, in many areas, since the early part of the 20th century. Now, as part of a mandate from Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) to improve the grid by modernizing the ways in which power is delivered and generated, a 153-mile swath of transmission lines is targeted to be upgraded. The aim is to reduce energy costs, relieve congestion and shore up the aging energy infrastructure.

John Maserjian, a spokesman for Transco, a public-private partnership of power companies in the area, said that congestion costs New Yorkers more than \$600 million a year. "Since these original transmission lines were first put into service, electricity use has grown, while generators in lower New York have recently begun to retire or are in need of replacement," he said. "Resolving these transmission constraints by strategically adding transmission capacity will enable power to flow more freely throughout the state, lower costs, increase use of renewable sources located upstate and improve the efficiency and reliability of the electric system."

Still, this is a corridor that runs right through the Hudson River Valley, which, with its strong agricultural base and scenic beauty, is one of the richest areas — visually and environmentally — in the state. And modernizing a grid isn't that simple; it's not like swapping out incandescent bulbs for LEDs.



Mr. Joseph worries about other historic properties in the Hudson River Valley.

Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

To accomplish the upgrade, the state's Public Service Commission has asked four companies, including National Grid, to submit proposals, and this process, which is embedded with all sorts of checks and balances, including public hearings, has thrown the region into disarray. More than 80 municipalities in 18 counties may be affected, including 24 in the Hudson River Valley. Real estate brokers say that some would-be buyers are walking away from deals, frightened off by the bright yellow "No Monster Power Lines" signs that dot the country roads, and by the uncertainty about how the plans will unfold, and where and in what form the upgrades will occur.

Town supervisors like William Gallagher, in Milan, worry about plummeting land values, and how that will affect the tax base. Some property owners, like Ms. Tranchita, worry about the health risks of higher-voltage lines (although the E.P.A. has said the science on those risks is still inconclusive). Businesses like the Omega Institute, an educational retreat in Rhinebeck, have canceled plans for expansion until the details are clear. And in Greenport, the viewshed of historic Olana, home of Frederic Edwin Church, the Hudson River School painter, is threatened.

Will Yandik, 36, runs his family's farm in Livingston with his brother and mother, selling fresh produce, pies and jams to tourists and locals who flock to his farm stand on Route 82. He , said he was poised to restore the 1850s farmhouse that sags atmospherically nearby, but he doesn't want to risk the

investment until he knows exactly what is going to happen to the 1930s-era transmission lines that run through his property. How the landscape looks, he said, “is one of the ways we monetize it. We’re in the tourist business as much as anything.”



Yellow “No Monster Power Lines” signs are appearing in the area. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In an initial round of proposals, each company that was invited to bid by the Public Service Commission, or P.S.C., submitted different routes for new transmission lines: while one was within the existing corridor, the rest were all over the place, raising the threat of eminent domain. In the wake of public outrage, and nodding to the sentiment expressed in a promise by Mr. Cuomo in his State of the State address in January that future transmission projects (though not this one) would be expedited if they stayed within existing easements, the P.S.C. has encouraged its bidders to revise their proposals to stay within the right of way the current lines now traverse.

But while the course correction is heartening, said Ned Sullivan, president of Scenic Hudson, “until the Public Service Commission definitively requires any new transmission lines to stay within the footprint of existing utility structures and

underground power lines wherever feasible, a dark cloud and real economic harm will continue to hang over the Hudson Valley.”

Scenic Hudson is one of many groups, including the Olana Partnership, the Preservation League of New York State and a slew of new grass-roots organizations, that have formed a coalition in response to the plans. They note the good intentions behind the governor’s initiative to relieve congestion between upstate power plants and wind generation and downstate customers, and his vow to close [Indian Point](#), the nuclear plant in Buchanan, N.Y. But some question the need for the upgrade altogether and express concern that the upgrade benefits only “downstaters.” And they are challenging the P.S.C. to find innovative ways to deliver power, including burying the power lines.



Will Yandik has delayed the restoration of the 1850s farmhouse on his family’s farm until a decision on the lines. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Recently, Mr. Sullivan and others met with representatives from National Grid, who gave them a preview of the company’s reworked proposal. “The good news is they stayed within the corridor, and eminent domain is off the table,” Mr. Sullivan said. “But they were still looking at towers that were going to be 40 feet higher than the existing ones.”

At 130 feet, that’s 50 feet taller than the tallest tree, said Greg Quinn, a horticulturist and author with a 145-acre black currant farm in Clinton, N.Y. Many of the towers, he said, “will have flashing lights and be alongside the ones that are there. Wires on a pole is what they did 75 years ago. We need to investigate new technologies, including underground.”

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The governor's office declined to comment, but Patrick Stella, a spokesman for National Grid, acknowledged that the process to date has been atypical, as usually only one company is invited to apply for an energy project. But "what you're seeing is a transparent process," he said. "We are addressing issues as best we can as they are brought to our attention. Now we are looking at structural heights of the transmission lines. We are looking to reduce those as we move forward in the process, and we're hopeful that we can do so. This is a long process designed to gain input from stakeholders, the customers."



Pamela Kline founded Farmers and Families for Livingston to oppose the power plans. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

As James Denn, public affairs officer at the P.S.C., said, "The commission is keenly interested in receiving public comment and input."

But buried power lines are more expensive, and the problems that occur on them are harder to find, said Daniel Esty, a professor of law and environmental policy at Yale, who encountered many of the same difficult trade-offs in his role as the former commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. But he also pointed out

that buried lines may be more resilient during severe storms. He described a project in Fairfield, Conn., and plans for another in northern New Hampshire where “a compromise has been struck where some transmission has been underground at the most aesthetically sensitive places,” he said.



Andrea Tranchita, who raises sheep, llamas, alpaca and Angora rabbits, is concerned that the proposed upgrade could pose health risks to her animals. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

When Pamela Kline and her husband, Tom, bought their 18th-century Dutch farmhouse 25 years ago, it had no heat, plumbing or electricity. But Mr. Kline was intent on saving it, Ms. Kline said, although as she told him at the time, “It would be cheaper if you had an affair.”

Now meticulously restored, it sits across Route 82 from Mr. Yandik’s Green Acres Farm on 70 acres of what used to be apple country. One transmission line proposal would take the driveway, the old orchard and part of the woods. And so a broker has told Ms. Kline, 67, who has lived mostly alone here since her husband’s death seven years ago, that she would likely be unable to sell her property. (Last year, Conor Murphy, a restoration carpenter and Ms. Kline’s son-in-law, bunked with her while he worked on an exquisite round

Shaker cow barn for Abby Rockefeller's Livingston farm; it, too, is bisected by power lines and threatened by the expansion.)

Ms. Kline, a textile designer and the founder of Traditions, a fine-linen bedding company, also founded Farmers and Families for Livingston, one of the local groups opposing the upgrade plans. Preternaturally organized, she was galvanized by a letter she received in October from National Grid, alerting her, "as an abutting neighbor," to the transmission project. When she called Mr. Yandik, who is a member of Livingston's town council, he and his colleagues said they had no idea what the project was about.

"Three hundred and fifty people showed up at our first meeting, which we held in the town garage among the snow plows because the town hall was too small," Ms. Kline said. "Including legislators, local TV stations and the P.S.C. It's been like a rocket ever since."

Livingston and its neighbor, Claverack, as well as other towns, passed resolutions opposing the plans, as did the Columbia County board of supervisors.

It appears there is nothing like a power project to unite a community.

Ms. Kline's group has applied for a grant from the Preservation League of New York for a historic resource survey to identify historic properties in Livingston, which may keep them from being affected. Jim Joseph, a Manhattan architect, who has spent 10 years restoring an elegant Greek Revival house here with his partner, Scott Frankel, a composer, has cataloged nine Livingston properties already on the National Historic Register within a three-mile radius of the existing lines; three miles is what the State Historic Preservation Office has designated as a buffer zone. Many other properties, including Ms. Kline's, are "on a pending list for nomination," she said. (Mr. Joseph has recorded 16 more in and around the City of Hudson, she added.)

As the process moves forward, said Mr. Maserjian, the Transco spokesman, the proposals "will include much more detail as to what the proposed projects would entail, including agricultural studies, environmental impacts and a study of the historic sites along the route. Following the Part B submission, there will be many additional opportunities for

formal public participation. We are still at the very beginning stages.”

Correction: May 15, 2014

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the municipality of Hudson, N.Y. It is a city, not a town.

Correction: May 19, 2014

And earlier version of this article misidentified an organization opposed to new power lines. It is the Olana Partnership, not the Olana Foundation.