

Pipeline protesters plead to Levy County Commission



Barbara Robbie Blake, like all of the protesters, speaks with passion about how the pipeline is dangerous to people and the environment, as well as potentially lowering the value of property in the areas it traverses.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 23, 2017 at 10:47 p.m.

BRONSON – A small group of people verbally petitioned the Levy County government Tuesday morning (Feb. 21) with their grievances in regard to a pipeline being constructed through Levy County.

A spokesman for a different pipeline company that already exists and passes through the county as an underground highway to transport natural gas also addressed the Levy County Commission in regard to safety issues regarding the pipe.

As for the people who feel adversely affected by the Sabal Trace pipeline, they accused builders of being killers of gopher tortoises and other protected creatures, which would be a violation of law if it were true.

Another complaint was the company being unreceptive to not going through property where a man had placed the ashes of family members.

Believing that the pipeline's proximity reduces property value for some landowners is another criticism.

The proverbial bottom line for the Levy County Board of County Commissioners is that it is powerless to stop the pipeline from continuing to be built.

Barbara Robbie Blake led the group. She questioned the safety, fire protection and emergency planning in the event of a leak.

Blake has been in Levy County for 37 years. She bought her property out by Chunky Pond (a lake located about three miles south from Bronson).

She said she felt like there was not enough notice in the past five years of this development taking place for people to voice their opinions in Levy County.

Blake noted the danger to the Suwannee River from the pipeline running under the river, and

she made reference to the disaster BP thrust upon the Gulf of Mexico when its Deep Water Horizon Drilling rig blew up.

Blake said she is concerned about a natural gas pipeline fire, and where she lives at Chunky Pond there is peat moss. Once a peat moss fire starts, it just keeps going, she said.

The pipeline is almost finished being constructed, she said.

Blake noted that people along the pipeline's path will be vaporized and instantly incinerated if there is an explosion.

She said many people have died in 2016 from natural gas incidents.

For instance, a buildup of natural gas caused an explosion and fire that killed seven people and injured dozens of others at a Maryland apartment building 2016, according to a Maryland newspaper.

Blake said she is concerned about the response in Levy County in the event of a disaster from the pipeline. She does not believe there is not the possibility for an adequate response before the calamity escalates – should the pipeline rupture and catch on fire.

Chairman Meeks said the Levy County Department of Emergency Management has a plan in the event of a manmade or natural disaster in Levy County.

County Commissioner Mike Joyner said the county sought funding from the pipeline company to have equipment to rescue pipeline workers who might be injured in the swamps and backwoods where ambulances would not go.

Joyner said that was back when David Knowles was in charge of the Levy County Department of Public Safety. The pipeline builders, Joyner said, ignored the request for equipment from Levy County.

LCDPS Director Mitch Harrell, who replaced Knowles, said there has been one request for assistance from EMS due to a work injuring an ankle, but other than that there have been no other requests for emergency medical services from the pipeline builders.

Robin L. Coon, another Levy County resident affected by the pipeline, said those builders did not go 50 feet out of the way to go around his property where he put his family members' ashes.

Laura Catlow, another Levy County resident, told about the corporations that own the Sable Trace Pipeline.

Catlow said the "incineration zone" for the pipeline is 800 feet from the center of the pipeline.

Catlow said she has been reporting violations she witnesses at the construction site to the appropriate regulatory agencies.

Workers take pictures of her and her car, she said.

How has Florida allowed the destruction of a 100- to 300-foot wide corridor through some of the most beautiful natural parts of Florida? she asked.

Mary Helen Wheeler of Alachua County also spoke. She is a former teacher, who taught at Bronson Elementary School and Chiefland for 10 years.

Wheeler was a candidate who ran against Ted Yoho, back when that district for the United States House of Representatives included Levy County.

Wheeler said she is among a group of people who have followed the progress of the pipeline land acquisition and construction for four years, from Jasper (Hamilton County) going south.

The pipeline developers saw wide open rural space to run the pipe and did not see opposition to it, despite people now recognizing the potential hazards to the eco-tourism and to the water supply.

Wheeler said she believes there can be a grassroots effort to stop the corporate world that has control over land. Until gas is passing through the pipeline, Wheeler believes this can be stopped by the people of Florida.

Matt Zamora, now a Marion County resident who lives in the Rainbow Lakes Estates area on

the border with Levy County, is another person who spoke.

Zamora is a 42-year-old United States Navy and United States Coast Guard veteran who spoke. He served eight years before his honorable discharge from the service.

When he was young, he lived in Chiefland with his grandparents Paul and Opal Falk in Whitted Estates. Zamora attended Chiefland Elementary School in 1982.

He had intended to help the Levy County Board of County Commissioners understand two things.

First he sought to bring awareness to Levy County that the Rainbow Lakes Estates Volunteer Fire Department can no longer respond to, he believes, households as it did before.

In Jan. 18, Marion County shut down the volunteer fire department, he said, and it relieved Fire Chief John Lake of his duties there.

That volunteer fire department is now going by the name of Florida First Responders Charities Inc., he said after the meeting, and as a homeowner, it doesn't feel like he should rely on them to save his home as he felt comfortable with the volunteer firefighters.

His other goal was to have the Levy County Commission let know home buyers in this county know about property next to the pipeline. Zamora said he was not informed about the pipeline when he bought his home in Marion County, near to the pipe.

The County Commission noted it is not in the business of notifying property owners about hazards, and that the buyer should beware.



Mike Laycock of a natural gas pipeline company separate from the group responsible for Sable Trail speaks about safety measures. The pipeline Laycock addresses is one that includes a stretch next to U.S. Highway 19 from an area far north of Chiefland and west of Florida and going south to a destination beyond the other side of the Cross Florida Barge Canal.

SAFETY EXPERT

Levy County Emergency Management Director John MacDonald invited Mike Laycock of Florida Gas Transmission Co. to speak about safety, County Coordinator

Wilbur Dean said as he introduced the man to the County Commission.

Laycock gave a presentation to show that Florida has many underground gas pipelines.

His most important message to people is to call before digging. The number to call is 8-1-1 and then the caller will find all of the possible utility interests where they plan to dig. Then, within 48 hours of contacting the utility, that company will help the excavator safely create the hole in the ground, or the ditch that they need.

Another important message Laycock shared was for the firefighters in the audience. If there is a breach of a pipeline, Laycock said it is ill-advised to try and find a shut-off valve.

Florida Gas Transmission has remote methods as well as crews who know what to do in such an emergency. Sometimes well-meaning first responders can create more of a danger than to reduce the hazard after a pipeline breaks and starts spilling natural gas.

After about an hour of discussion, it was clear that several Florida residents are not happy about new gas pipelines. It also became clear that telling the Levy County Board of County Commissioners about these complaints brings about no action, because the County Commission is as powerless over utility companies as the people whose property was crossed as a result of laws that allow transportation of natural gas across miles and miles of terrain.