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Williams: Where Dominion's gas compressor station is concerned, Buckingham deserves the same treatment as Mount Vernon

• MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

Gov. Ralph Northam empathized with concerns raised in June by a caller during the "Ask the Governor" radio show about a proposed Dominion natural gas compressor station's impact on the view from George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Surely something could be done, the caller said, noting Northam has the ear of Dominion's CEO.

The facility in Charles County, Md., wasn't on Northam's radar, he replied, "but it's something that would concern me, and I will be glad to look into it."

"I really want to move more toward renewable energy and wean ourselves away from fossil fuels, and I have told people, I've told Dominion, that by 2030 I would like at least 30 percent or more of the energy that's generated in Virginia to come from renewable energy. And we are making progress with both solar and wind," he added.

As for the Maryland compressor station and Mount Vernon, "if it's going to impact their view, if it's going to contribute to environmental detriment, it's something I'm concerned about and I will do everything that I can to look into it."

Northam wasn't alone in his concerns about the Mount Vernon view possibly being sullied by smokestacks across the Potomac River.

The project also was in the crosshairs of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, which bills itself as "the oldest women's patriotic society in the United States."

When people of power and privilege speak, those in high places listen. In October, a compromise was crafted. Dominion agreed to find an alternative site.

"We appreciate the cooperative spirit and support Dominion provided for our preservation efforts, and our partners and stakeholders as well as the tens of thousands of people who have stepped forward to share their concerns and spread awareness about this important cause," the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association said in a [statement](#).

One association's successful preservation effort is another community's uphill battle.

Where the Mount Vernon group found compromise, descendants of slaves living in Buckingham County's historic Union Hill community have found something less, years into a fight against the energy titan's efforts to erect a compressor station there.

Where is Northam's concern for them?

In response to my request for the governor's position on *that* compressor station, a spokeswoman emailed an Oct. 16 letter by Secretary of Natural Resources Matthew J. Strickler to the members of the Governor's Advisory Council on Environmental Justice.

"With respect to the Buckingham compressor station, [the Department of Environmental Quality] has held a number of public information sessions in the Union Hill community, and is continuing its public engagement. DEQ is focused on requiring that all federal and state health-based standards will be met on both a short-term and long-term basis," Strickler wrote. "The governor and I are watching closely to ensure that standard is met."

Mary Finley-Brook, a member of the Governor's Advisory Council on Environmental Quality, said Strickler's letter was a reply to the council's letter in mid-August urging Northam to suspend the air permitting process for the Buckingham compressor station "pending further review of the station's impacts on the health and quality of life of those living in close proximity."

As for the content of Strickler's letter, the DEQ did not hold any informational meetings within Union Hill, Finley-Brook said.

Finally, the advisory council itself is in limbo. State legal counsel has told its members that under their interpretation of state law, the council — created by executive order by Northam's predecessor, Terry McAuliffe — legally expired on Oct. 31, one year after it was established.

And then there's Northam's removal earlier this month of two members from the State Air Pollution Control Board ahead of the board's Dec. 10 vote on the compressor station, a move that has alarmed environmental groups and some residents of the Union Hill community.

The two members' terms expired in June, but they were to remain on the board until they either resigned or the governor removed them.

Ofirah Yheskel, Northam's press secretary, said potential candidates had been interviewed and that the governor's decision had nothing to do with the upcoming air board vote.

"He's not making the decision now because of anything pending before the air board," she said.

Northam should have factored in what was pending before the board because of the tremendous learning curve he was asking the new members to take on. To remove two members one month before such a crucial vote on a complicated, long-standing issue makes no sense.

And back to his response to the caller on WTOP's ["Ask the Governor"](#): If Northam wants Virginia to generate more renewable energy, the \$7 billion Atlantic Coast Pipeline — which would move natural gas 600 miles from West Virginia through Virginia into North Carolina — would appear to be at loggerheads with that goal. The pipeline would appear to lock Dominion, the project's lead developer, into a fossil fuels focus for generations to come.

In the meantime, Dominion has offered Union Hill \$5.1 million for a package of improvements — including expanded emergency services and a new community center — contingent on the approval of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the compressor station in the heart of that community.

If opponents' fears of air, water and noise pollution are valid, along with concerns about the project's impact on their bodies, the construction of a community center to promote health and wellness is an odd inducement indeed. Who'd want to live in Union Hill?

"How do you put a price tag on people's health and welfare and safety?" said Chad Oba, president of Friends of Buckingham.

Still, the result of the offer has been predictable, pitting neighbor against neighbor, as residents resigned to Dominion's power and the ultimate approval of the compressor station grab for any material solace they can garner.

The Rev. Paul Wilson, pastor of Union Hill and Union Grove Baptist churches, has witnessed these divisions within his own congregation.

"Once you start throwing the money around, folks are saying: 'I've got to get what I can of it, while I can,'" Wilson said. "People are doing flip-flops now. ... The governor sold us out, too."

Buckingham, a poor rural county, needs the revenue. Union Hill is isolated, elderly and marginalized enough to be vulnerable to environmental injustice. It has environmental

groups and the Virginia State Conference NAACP fighting on its behalf, but as Wilson notes with a rueful laugh, "We're not Mount Vernon."

"I tell you what: If we were somebody special, with some of the right connections, it would never be put where they're talking about putting it," he said of the compressor station.

Perhaps Union Hill should borrow the clout of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

"There are people there who have money and status," Oba said. "They weren't people of lower income who weren't in a position to push back. Why is the health of one community more important than the other?"

Someone, somewhere, made the decision that the preservation of a pristine view from a historic slave plantation carries a higher value than the health and welfare of this pocket of Buckingham populated by the descendants of slaves.

For the marginalized, environmental injustice isn't a blot on the horizon. It's up close and personal.