

My Six Cents on All the Razzmatazz

The fight to run power transmission lines to Haymarket, Va. in Prince William County has been going on for nearly four years now. It has twisted and turned, gotten into the press, and degraded to name calling – but it is not getting resolved.

There is a workable solution that can get everyone some or most of what they want, if they just stop behaving badly. But before going into the solution, let's get a grip on some of the hidden motivations also in play.

From the beginning, I was taken by the complete stupidity of the whole thing. Why would anyone locate a data center complex next to a small country town, without sufficient power available? Why would the County government agree, nay, encourage it? Why would Dominion Energy propose an overhead high voltage transmission line right through residential areas, and fight so hard against underground installation?

The whole project seems wrong on so many levels. I finally have come to realize that there is more to this than the issues which are being made visible. There are hidden agendas. The entities involved have other agendas that are driving their actions, but they are not admitting to the hidden agendas. The problem with hidden agendas is that they impair both the proposer, and those tasked with making decisions. Logical proposals can't be made when thinking is clouded by attempting to hide underlying motives at the same time. Informed decisions can't be made with only part of the information being shared. In the end, lying is used to protect hidden agendas - and that is what is happening here.

Credibility is lost, and none of the parties trust the others - not a good environment for developing wise solutions. In the interest of "clearing the air," here are a few descriptions of these hidden agendas, and a proposed solution based on considering them.

Why did Amazon locate in Haymarket? It paid around 4 times more for the site than the assessed value. And, when incentivized by the County to relocate to nearby Innovation Park (which has the needed infrastructure), it refused. I don't know what Amazon's agenda is, such that it needs the Haymarket site, and it has remained secretive during this entire time. There obviously is a very significant advantage for Amazon in that location for its operation of multiple data centers. Amazon has a gag order with the county, so the county would not divulge that Amazon is the land owner. But citizens found other ways to confirm that it is Amazon. Amazon advertised for Haymarket data center staff with Top Secret SCI clearances. Amazon won a contract to provide a secure cloud for the federal government. Does Amazon hope to hide its secret facility in the country? Obviously, that didn't work out. Is this site adjacent to some secure fiber network that it can tap into? Whatever might be known will not be divulged. Does this facility house all the data on phone calls and emails that Snowden exposed? Well then, Haymarket can just change its town motto to "Citizen privacy ends here." I don't know what Amazon truly has in mind. The fact that it chose this site is at the heart of the controversy and is the sole justification for the power line.

Why did Prince William County encourage Amazon to locate here, knowing the problems with the site? The PWC Economic Development Office insists that data centers will encourage economic growth. The county's hidden agenda is that data centers generate substantial amounts of "free" tax revenue - the government is not required to increase roads, schools, police etc. for a business that employs only a few dozen people. Much different than an office building, generating the same level of tax revenue, but also employing thousands of people. But office buildings also bring costs to the county in requisite infrastructure and support services. The county will be reluctant to lose tax revenues from Amazon's or other future data centers. But, the county also has to deal with the objections raised by people who have to sacrifice for the power requirements for this Amazon Haymarket data center development. The county is not in a very comfortable position, and is taking criticism from most of the parties involved and impacted.

What is Dominion's hidden agenda with this project? Dominion's business is selling electricity to its customer base, which are the ratepayers of Virginia, but also other power companies. Dominion claims it has to provide power to anyone who requests it. Amazon, its customer, has now announced that it already has sufficient power service to satisfy all but its last proposed building, and it may not even build the final building - thus putting the need for this entire powerline project into question. Dominion has been constantly changing its own story. First it was for a data center, then it was growth west of Haymarket, then it was power to the nearby hospital, then they interjected reliability. There is little-to-no growth planned west of Haymarket. The hospital is operational with power already provided to it. And reliability has not been an issue with anyone in this area. So it looks like Dominion's hidden agenda is to expand its power grid here as part of the network across the state so that it can sell to other power companies. Dominion seems to be trying to build a major trans-state transmission grid, a piece at a time, and this data center project helps that goal. I have to wonder, would Dominion have wanted Haymarket as the substation location for expanding its network grid, if Amazon hadn't selected Haymarket for a data center project?

There is another part to Dominion's hidden agenda: its adversity to burying the transmission line. Reality is, once Dominion has a transmission right of way established, it can upgrade the line at any time, with minimal review. As outlined above, if it gets this Haymarket project, Dominion will want to increase transmission capacity through the Haymarket substation in the future. Dominion points to higher cost as the objection to undergrounding, but underground transmission will be more difficult to expand in the future. If Dominion's true agenda is to use this project as part of a larger transmission grid expansion, then its other hidden agenda is that increasing the capacity of an overhead transmission route is easier and faster, than dealing with it underground.

Why did the SCC Commissioners ignore SCC Staff advice? The SCC staff, in reviewing Dominion's proposed routes, concluded that the best solution was partially buried along Route 66. But the SCC Commissioners instead tossed bombs to the County in the form of two equally disastrous overhead routes, and tried to force the County to choose which fuse to light. The SCC Commissioners are supposed to make the final decision, and then grant Dominion approval to commence construction. I suspect their actions in this case were affected by the fact that one of the judges on the Commission was formerly a lawyer with Dominion.

So taking all these hidden agendas into consideration, here is how this issue could be resolved - to everyone's satisfaction.

Amazon wants to operate its data centers as quietly as possible, and more importantly, to get out of the spotlight. Amazon reported to the Army Corps of Engineers that it currently has sufficient power for all but its last building. If Amazon does need additional power whenever it builds its last building, Amazon could consider a "power production at point of use" solution. They have a lot of unused roof there, and solar power should be possible, either direct photovoltaics or solar heat driving a steam generator. Another method could be a gas turbine generator. Any of these are viable self-contained solutions, removing the need for a substation and transmission lines. Given their brain power and resources, I am sure Amazon could figure out how to power that last building, and for less money than the cost of any of the currently proposed transmission routes. With any of these solutions, Amazon Web Services can operate a more or less self-contained data center complex, and the threat of high voltage transmission lines on residents' properties goes away. The local residents can relax, and accept that the data center complex is where it is and learn to ignore it.

The County can keep receiving tax revenue from Amazon's operation and get back to normal county business - with a greater appreciation of the citizen grass root movement to preserve a degree of natural environment in the county, as well as elected officials' need to consider the concerns of their citizenry.

The SCC can dismiss the Haymarket transmission line and substation request, and wash its hands of the controversy.

Dominion Energy, once free of running new power transmission to Haymarket, can stop having to spend time and money to defend itself, and can instead devote better time and energy to engineering rational solutions for ensuring sufficient power distribution in the future. Hopefully, it will have a greater appreciation of the adverse impact of high voltage transmission lines on residential areas, and will work more closely with planners and residents in laying out any future electrical plans. I am sure there is a less expensive, less controversial solution that does not infringe on the natural environment, and gives Dominion Energy what it thinks it needs. And, Dominion will find it, if it no longer has to fight to run transmission lines to Haymarket. It might even start considering alternative methods of supplying power as a best practice.

So there you have it. Not exactly the way it is going just now, or rather, not going. But, with a few adjustments, based on what everyone really wants, a workable solution. Amazon can brag that it is on the cutting edge of environmental responsibility; residents can relax confident that they are safe from high voltage power towers; the County Supervisors can feel empowered that they defended their citizens; and Dominion and the SCC can regain public confidence that they are working for our benefit, rather than against us.

I challenge the involved powers-to-be to stop the razzmatazz freak show, and resolve this issue with integrity.

Tom Sheehan
Haymarket, Virginia