

CL&P and Northeast Utilities Power Line Upgrades In Our Area

During phase one, Northeast Utilities is planning to upgrade their current transmission line running from Norwalk through the towns of Wilton, Weston, Redding and Bethel with a 345kV line (replacing their current 115kV line). The new steel towers are planned to be 130 feet tall, twice the size of the existing 60 foot towers. One hundred eighty acres of additional land must be purchased from homeowners or seized through eminent domain in order to widen the existing right-of-way from 80 to 125 feet. The 130 foot steel towers will be built to a density of nine per mile (every 600 feet) and will emit heat and noise.

The towers pose an environmental threat to our communities. They will dwarf our treetops and scar the landscape. Access roads will be built to move heavy equipment into regulated areas. Wetlands will be impacted. Open space will be exposed to deforestation. Private property will be seized to provide the necessary width for the right-of-way. The Connecticut Siting Council has sole jurisdiction over this project and will determine the need for the project and the route it will take (see following article on Siting Council). A coalition called Communities for Responsible Energy (see sidebar) has been formed to try to reduce the impact of this project.

During phase two, CL&P proposes a massive 345kV line between Norwalk and Wallingford (60 mile loop) which will run through Easton, among 18 other towns. Weston has formed a coalition to oppose most aspects of Phase Two called the Woodlands Coalition for Responsible Energy (see sidebar) and Easton has signed on to that coalition. Please stay informed and join our town's fight against this environmental and aesthetic assault by contacting our town hall to ask for an update and times of meeting dates.

What Is the Siting Council?

When regional towns find themselves facing the specter of cell towers in residential neighborhoods and swaths cut through designated conservation areas and historic districts to allow for heightened transmission towers up to 130 feet, the decision lies with the Siting Council. What is the Siting Council and what criteria do they use in making decisions that so heavily impact our towns?

According to Mary Anne Guitar, former First Selectman of Redding and chairman of the Siting Council in 1975, the agency was formed in response to opposition to a 1970 CL & P plan. A "power facilities evaluation council [was formed] to approve all new projects, making a judgement on environmental compatibility and public need."¹ Emphasis under the newly formed council was upon requiring and weighing full environmental documentation when considering utility applications. Prior to this legislation, the utility companies generally got what they wanted.

The "Public Utility Environmental Standards Act" states that "the council shall consist of 1) the Commissioner of Environmental Protection or his designee, 2) the chairman or his designee of the Public Utilities Control Authority, 3) one designee of the speaker of the House, one of the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and 4) five members of the public, to be appointed by the Governor, at least two of whom shall be experienced in the field of ecology and not more than one of whom shall have affiliation past or present with any utility or governmental utility regulatory agency."

Clearly both in the composition of its membership and its initial mandate, the Siting Council was created as a watchdog to ensure that due consideration was given to environmental impacts and that greater burden was laid upon utility companies to prove public need as they saw it. Despite that, recent decisions on cell towers seem to indicate that local concerns notwithstanding, the Siting Council's current sense of what is good for Connecticut's citizens seems to be seamless cell coverage. What has become of the mandate?

1. *Property Power, How to Keep the Bulldozer, the Power Line and the Highwaymen Away from Your Door*, Mary Anne Guitar, Doubleday, 1972

Grassroots Works! Planning and Zoning Denies Cell Tower

There is a feeling of righteousness when individuals are fighting for their rights and their homes. Such was the atmosphere during the November 19th, 2001 Planning and Zoning public hearing on an application for a Sprint cell tower at one of two locations, 25 Burr Street or 354 Black Rock Turnpike. Alarmed at the prospect of a tower view directly across their road, Burr Street residents Bruce and Jane DeCourt launched a vigorous campaign to organize and educate the neighbors.

As Sprint representatives scrambled to justify omissions and mistakes on their maps, seeking to explain, with great solemnity, the need for a 190 foot cell tower to provide coverage on a two mile stretch, one resident after another approached the microphone protesting that the loss in property values and aesthetics was not warranted for the sake of a mere convenience.

At issue too, was the question of jurisdiction. Sprint's condescending disregard of Easton's agencies was apparent both in their failure to seek an audience with the town's Inland Wetlands Commission, as well as in their responses to questions from Planning and Zoning members. When deficiencies in the plan regarding local regulations were questioned, Sprint's attorney, Tom Regan reiterated in each case that all was in accordance with Connecticut Siting Council guidelines.

Indicative of growing concern statewide regarding cell tower placement and loss of local jurisdiction to the Connecticut Siting Council, was the fact that both Representative John Stripp & Senator John McKinney were in attendance at the Planning and Zoning hearing and later at the related Board of Selectmen meeting. In an exhaustively thorough recommendation to the Board of Selectmen, P & Z denied Sprint's application, citing, among other reasons, strong public opposition to the installation, a flawed technical presentation, lack of potential alternative sites, "severe detrimental impact to the adjacent area" (loss of property values), inadequate consideration of environmental impacts and inattention to town zoning regulations. On December 6th, the Board of Selectmen upheld the denial.

On or about February 28th, Sprint filed with the Connecticut Siting Council for a certificate of "environmental compatibility and public need for the construction, maintenance, and operation of a telecom facility." Despite this, it was heartening to see the townspeople, the Planning and Zoning Commission, the Board of Selectmen, Representative Stripp and Senator McKinney all working together.

Scenic Road Ordinance Upheld Unanimously on Redding Road

The former Lieb property at 65 Redding Road was the recent focal point of a violation of the Scenic Road Ordinance. The new owners rebuilt a rock wall and erected a vinyl fence on top of the wall blocking the views of not only the former Leib property, but views of nearby Aspetuck Land Trust property as well. Upon notification, the new owners responded by seeking a variance of the ordinance. Eight roads in Easton that include over 170 homes are designated as scenic: Judd Road, Adams Road, Silver Hill Road, Norton Road, Wells Hill Road, Bibbins Road, Redding Road, and Everett Road. To be considered for Scenic Road status, a road has to meet criteria outlined in the Scenic Road Ordinance. In addition, the majority of landowners on the proposed scenic road must petition Planning and Zoning for approval. Only after Planning and Zoning review with the majority of landowners in favor of the designation can a road be declared scenic.

The Redding Road neighbors, along with residents from the other scenic roads, representatives of Citizens For Easton, and the Aspetuck Land Trust voiced their concerns about maintaining the integrity of the scenic road ordinance at a Selectmen's meeting. The majority of those in attendance felt that allowing the fencing of the views on Redding Road would lead to further violations of the ordinance on other Easton scenic roads. The unique rural character of Easton was being challenged, not only that of Redding Road. After reviewing blueprints, photographs, and hearing from all concerned, the Easton selectmen voted unanimously to uphold the Scenic Road Ordinance. The fence has been taken down and the views that make Easton unique remain.

Farmland Preservation: A Key Factor in Easton's Appeal

A longtime focus of Citizens for Easton has been finding ways to maintain the town's rural character by saving large tracts of farmland from development. In 1985, CFE's own Will Tressler was instrumental in instituting Connecticut's first Agricultural Land Preservation Fund, which to date has stockpiled more than \$50,000 in donations earmarked to help purchase available farmland for the town.

First Selectman Bill Kupinse formed the Easton Farmland Preservation Committee two years ago. The EFPC generated a list of proposals designed to provide the town and local farmers with information and encouragement to find alternative uses for these lands, that are both consistent with our agricultural heritage as well as profitable for farmers. In addition, the owners of our larger tracts of land in town were each given a complimentary one year membership in American Farmland Trust, an organization that publishes innovative ways for farmers to preserve their property as undeveloped farmland. Happily, the town has secured the purchase of the Stetson property, known locally as "Buster's Stratfield Farm" on Morehouse Road. The combination of municipal use (proposed new school and playing fields) and an expansive area set aside as beautiful open space, hopefully heralds a new era in our town's attitude toward seeking to stem the tide of unbridled development of these precious sites. At a recent town hearing, the citizen's outcry against the cluster development of the Blaze property on South Park Avenue contributed to the withdrawal of that application.

Now, it is even more important to continue to stand up and speak out for ways for our town to balance this surge toward development with prudent preservation efforts. Several other such farmland tracts in town have caught the eyes of developers. Those interested in lending a voice to help guide the town in maintaining a connection with our agricultural heritage are welcomed to contact Easton Farmland Preservation Committee members Will Tressler at 268-7674 or David Sylvestro at 459-0935.

Assistance Available to Property Owners Interested in Enhancing Wildlife Habitat

"The Coverts Project" is a national outreach program sponsored locally by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service and is available without charge to assist property owners who want to improve and enjoy the woodlands in their own backyards. A "covert" is a thicket that provides shelter for wildlife. Kevin Broderick of Fairfield is one of 25 individuals who recently completed the course at the Yale Forestry Camp, where he worked closely with state natural resource professionals. Attendees at the seminar were taught about various species of trees, how to identify them, and the importance of having a variety of trees to preserve forest land in Connecticut.

Broderick found out about the program when the Pequot Fish and Game Club in Newtown, where he is a member, was looking for ways to manage its own property and improve the land for wildlife. Parcels on which the Coverts Project might be applicable will most likely be two or more acres, with a meadow or wooded area. His recommendations may include how to thin out areas to have light reach smaller trees or advice on enhancements for wildlife. When one species benefits, invariably other species benefit also. Broderick can also provide information on other experts that could be contacted, such as state foresters or wildlife biologists if applicable.

Property owners who are interested in learning more are welcome to call Broderick at 336-3603 for advice or information on forest and wildlife conservation. It is an ideal way to have a direct and positive effect on the environment right in our own backyard.