

Manchester Officials Not Opposed to SRL Gas Pipeline At This Time

Recently, New Jersey Natural Gas (NJNG) has submitted a Petition to the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (BPU) to construct the Southern Reliability Link (SRL). The SRL is a proposed 28-mile natural gas pipeline that would begin in Chesterfield Township and tie into NJNG's existing pipeline in Manchester Township. The purpose of the SRL is to provide a redundant source of natural gas to NJNG's customers in Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean Counties. Currently, NJNG provides natural gas to their customers from a single pipeline beginning in Middlesex County and extending southward along the coast to southern Ocean County. Superstorm Sandy presented a situation where a number of NJNG customers' service was interrupted because of damage to their only existing pipeline. NJNG's stated purpose of the SRL is to have a secondary means of providing service to their customers to avoid any service interruptions in the event of emergencies or otherwise.

For the SRL to be constructed, the BPU must evaluate the various issues and vote to approve the project. The BPU is a state agency vested with the authority to oversee the regulated utilities which provide critical services such as natural gas, electric, water, telecommunications and cable. The BPU consists of five commissioners appointed by the Governor. The process to evaluate the project begins with the filing of a Petition to the BPU. Thereafter, the moving party (in this case NJNG) and any opposition are required to exchange "discovery." Discovery is information, such as route plans, environmental studies, rate studies, etc. In this case, several towns in Burlington County and a number of environmental groups have opposed the pipeline. Those parties are still in the discovery stage. During the course of this process, the BPU will hold public sessions to hear the pros and cons about the project from the parties, citizens, and interest groups. All of the public comments are incorporated into the record and considered by the BPU as they formulate their opinion. In fact, two public hearings have taken place. The first was held in the Manchester Township Courtroom on July 27th. The BPU will hold at least three more public sessions. In order to be approved, NJNG has to prove that the SRL is reasonably necessary for the service, convenience and welfare of the public. Once the BPU makes their decision, the parties can appeal to the Appellate Division of the New Jersey Superior Court.

The SRL proposed path begins in Chesterfield, extends east through Burlington County, cuts through Plumsted and Jackson townships in Ocean County, enters and exits the Joint Base and ties into NJNG's existing infrastructure in Manchester Township at the intersection of Route 70 and Colonial Drive. Approximately two miles of new pipe will be installed in Manchester Township in the Route 70 utility easements and Route 547. Importantly, this new pipe is 30-inches in diameter as opposed to the 12-inch and 20-inch pipe that already exists in Manchester. Considering the SRL is a transmission pipeline and not designed to feed residential units but to supply the NJNG existing pipeline, the larger pipes are needed.

Obviously, safety is the number one concern. Unlike the towns in Burlington County that are not currently serviced with natural gas and do not have an existing natural gas infrastructure, Manchester does. In fact, when shown a map of the existing natural gas pipes in Manchester, I was surprised by the amount. As such, we are not introducing a new risk to the town. The location of the SRL pipes in Manchester are over 300-feet away from Shop Rite, Leisure Village West, Manchester Township Elementary School and Manchester First Aid. Additionally, the pipeline will be constructed with emergency shut off valves at small intervals and would be installed according to Federal Regulations. Another factor in this equation is the cost of the pipeline. From the information at hand, NJNG contends they are footing the bill. However, they are reserving the right to petition the BPU for an increase in prices down the road.

At this point, the Council and I have opted not to join in the opposition to the SRL. However, we continue to monitor its progress with the BPU. The next public hearing is scheduled for December 1, 2015 at the Board of Public Utilities located at 44 South Clinton Avenue in Trenton. I encourage you to attend if possible.

Manchester Mayor Kenneth T. Palmer