

Crane climbers sentenced, one goes to jail

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Top, Heather G. Doyle; bottom, Carling Sothoron. FILE PHOTOS

Prince Frederick, MD - Two women who climbed a crane at the staging site for the controversial Dominion Cove Point project in Lusby in February went before a District Court judge Monday, April 20.

Both women—Carling Sothoron, 28 of Baltimore; and Heather G. Doyle, 31 of Washington, DC—pled guilty to trespassing on posted property. The two, who were protesting Dominion's \$3.8 billion construction of a liquefaction unit at the facility, were given the same options for sentencing. The women chose different options.

Sothoron accepted probation before judgement. The probation is unsupervised and is for a period of three years. Additionally, she was ordered by Judge John Edward Nunn to pay \$300 of a \$500 fine plus court costs. A stipulation of the probation requires Sothoron to stay off of Dominion property for the three-year duration and have no contact with company employees.

Noting that the Cove Point project is expected to take three years, Doyle instead chose a jail sentence. The maximum sentence was for 90 days. Nunn gave the woman 40 days incarceration, including credit for the day she spent behind bars following the Feb. 3 incident.

Sothoron's counsel was local attorney Mark J. Palumbo, who told Nunn his client "is impassioned" about the environmental issues stemming from the Cove Point project.

Assistant State's Attorney Michael Gerst noted that Sothoron does have a prior trespassing charge in another state. That incident occurred in 2012. Doyle also has a prior conviction on trespassing charges in Virginia.

Gerst read the summary of charges into the record at both hearings. Doyle disagreed to the summary's characterization that the women's climbing up 175 feet was performed in a dangerous manner. She claimed the report contained errors "about the technical aspects of climbing" and she and Sothoron were "climbing in a safe fashion."

The women had intended to unfurl a banner warning the populace of the dangers the Dominion project posed to the environment.

Doyle was represented by Mark Goldstone, who previously defended a group of about 20 plant project protesters arrested for trespassing at two Solomons venues—a pier on the Patuxent River built by Dominion and the headquarters of the project's lead contractor, Kiewit.

Goldstone stated the three-year probation period was "excessive," and declared his client "is an activist" and the purpose of the banner was to warn the public of the dangers of the Cove Point project. The attorney then declared the liquefaction unit could lead to a catastrophe "due to methane gas leaks. The activists say this is not a done deal. They are calling on the community to rise up and oppose this."

"The problem is, the action you took is illegal," Nunn told Doyle. "You have to try to bring the argument within the confines of the law. It's not enough to complain about the problem—but there has to be a solution. You have to be part of the solution. Climbing up on a crane and unfurling a banner is not a solution."

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