

## Life above the pipeline

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**Hollywood, MD** - It appears the final hurdles are being cleared and the marathon that began earlier this decade will end with a big corporation winning. The huge construction project at Cove Point Liquefied Natural Gas Plant in Lusby has been quite a rural saga. The actual building of the liquefaction unit—which will allow Dominion Energy to export natural gas to buyers in Asia—as logistically challenging as it was, appears to have been the easy part of the story to tell. The human components seem much more compelling and complex than a project with a nearly \$4 billion price tag.

It was sometime during the summer of 2013 that the Cove Point expansion story began to grow legs—at least four of them, it seems. TheBayNet.com has featured several stories about the project, the protests, the litigation and the prodigious numbers—financial, scientific and humanity-related—which are all part of the narrative. This story has not reached its conclusion. It's fairly safe to say the drama will continue. We should never be lulled into the mindset that the work at this plant is routine. We pray that the most extraordinary people will be responsible for its operation.

I have admiration for the collective spirit shown by those who object to the project. I am also impressed with the patience and persistence of the project promoters. With that said, I would like to address the criticism frequently leveled by project opponents, that the proponents of this project are greedy and only care about money. I think what troubles me about this is the notion that they are the only ones in this drama who are innately mercenary.

For environmental activists (not to be confused with local residents who have voluntarily protested), getting involved in the Cove Point debate is good for business—their business. These environmental organizations are run like businesses. Their staffs are not Peace Corps volunteers or soldiers in the Salvation Army. This is how they earn a comfortable living. The letters they send out to supporters always include requests for contributions. They seek and receive grant money. Like lobbyists, they also tout wind and solar as the only acceptable way to go. However, both of those energy components are still in the incubator stages. Panels and turbines take up a lot of space and, in the case of wind turbines, can be as noisy as the plants where fossil fuels are spent. The wind and solar people are business people, too, and their products are every bit as flawed and risky as the fossil fuel industry.

The homeowners who are opposed, as you would expect, are fretting about their property values. That's understandable. A home is a huge investment. While they also express concerns about health issues due to emissions from the plant, the fact is that homeowners everywhere, and their children, are living in a risky world due to radon and carbon monoxide within their own homes. Small deer ticks can easily breach the walls of homes and render a resident ill with Lyme disease. Yes, given society's plethora of health risks, the emissions angst might be a red herring. The truth is living near a plant doesn't improve your property values the same way living near a golf course or the waterfront does (oddly, Cove Point residents have all three in their neighborhood).

The project critics also deride the Dominion shareholders without ever putting a face on these people. Some of the individuals who own stock might be frail, retired Sunday school teachers who are merely hoping to have a nest egg in their declining years. Average, blue collar people frequently put their money at risk in the Stock Market, too.

There has also been local criticism because Dominion is based in Virginia instead of Maryland. The last time I looked Virginia was not only part of the U.S. but a Maryland neighbor. The two states share a river, a bay, an ocean, a peninsula, a beltway, several bridges and a pro football team.

Are the skilled laborers who worked on the project greedy, too? For labor, this project gave members a chance to recover from an economy that tanked last decade. Even with the cash pocketed from working at Cove Point the past few years, a lot of them probably couldn't afford to buy a local Cove Point protester's home.

While you can certainly criticize the local elected officials for their handling of negotiations with the plant owners, accusing them of taking bribes goes beyond the pale. That is an accusation that should never be made without some serious evidence to back it up. Believe me, everyone in the news business has been looking for it. We haven't reported it because, apparently, it isn't there.

Yes, even as someone whose job it is to write stories about this ongoing process, I guess I'm in it for the money, too. But if this story didn't exist I would be writing about something else. An out-of-state environmental activists once emailed me and implied that I was "bought and paid for" by Dominion. For his information, I am still waiting for that first check to arrive in the mail.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Calvert's economy was built on something more palatable like it was in the days when tobacco farming, fishing and even tourism adequately sustained us? Instead our community's economic viability is now tethered to the energy industry. This area has good citizens who can foster relationships among corporate suits and any disappointed, dismayed property owners. We all crave prosperity and time will tell if expansion of a natural gas plant was the prudent road to travel. Life above the pipeline will go on and the journey continues.

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