

Dominion Energy plans to build a 13-mile natural gas pipeline from southwestern Wake County north toward Durham County, and much of the route could follow the American Tobacco Trail.

The state Board of Transportation agreed this month to grant [Dominion Energy](#) an easement to build the 12-inch pipeline in the former railroad corridor that is now [a cycling and walking trail known as the ATT](#). For a one-time payment of \$3 million the utility can build and operate the pipeline parallel to the trail from Morrisville Parkway in Cary about 6 miles north through Chatham County to Scott King Road in Durham.

Dominion Energy spokeswoman Persida Montanez says the company has not chosen a final route for the pipeline, which would help provide gas to growing parts of Wake, Chatham and Durham counties. Montanez said the pipeline will run generally from west of Apex to an area southwest of Research Triangle Park.

But in a presentation to Cary officials last year, the company said building the pipeline along the American Tobacco Trail makes sense, because it is the shortest route on land that is “pre-disturbed” and doesn’t involve acquiring new right-of-way from numerous landowners.

NCDOT owns the former railroad corridor, which ranges from 100 to 200 feet wide with the trail down the middle. Dominion Energy would bury the pipeline 40 to 45 feet from the center of the trail, in a 30-foot-wide clearing, Montanez said.

The company would replant native trees and shrubs to create a natural buffer between the trail and the pipeline, she said.

“We understand and value that the American Tobacco Trail is enjoyed by many for recreational purposes and its natural beauty,” Montanez wrote in an email. “As with any Dominion Energy construction project, if this is the route selected, we would work with the utmost respect and care.”

That may be, but construction of the pipeline will surely disrupt use of the trail and destroy a significant amount of the tree canopy that shades it, says Curt

Devereux, president of the [Triangle Rails to Trails Conservancy](#), which worked to create the American Tobacco Trail.

“What you’ll have is kind of a skinny canopy along the trail, rather than trees that go back 9 or 10 deep,” Devereux said in an interview. “It’s going to change the character of the trail markedly for a while during construction, and then the long-term change to the canopy will not be a plus.”

Devereux learned of the potential use of the trail corridor for the pipeline only last week and posted an item about it on the conservancy’s Facebook page Tuesday afternoon. Dave Connelly, a long-time trail advocate and user in Durham, soon sent an email to several Triangle government officials asking how such a potentially disruptive project could have gotten this far unnoticed.

“It’s incredible that neither NCDOT nor the Board of Transportation thought to mention this to people who use the ATT,” Connelly wrote. “If someone wanted to plant a pipeline on the North Carolina Railroad corridor, do you think NCRR would not mention it to Norfolk Southern?”

Devereux thinks approval of the easement on land NCDOT owns means the project will go forward. But he thinks those concerned about the trail may be able to influence details of construction and the planned buffer as Dominion Energy seeks permits in the coming months.

Montanez says the company will need permits from the state Department of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. She said none of those permits would require a public hearing but that if the trail route is chosen the company “would be committed to outreach with local stakeholders and park visitors to educate them about the project, the construction process and measures we would take to ensure the well-being and enjoyment of the trail.”

Dominion Energy hopes to have permits in hand so construction can begin in late September or early October, she said.

The easement agreement between NCDOT and Dominion Energy won’t become final until the company develops its plan and gets the needed permits, said Katie Trout, spokeswoman for NCDOT’s Rail Division. Trout said NCDOT will do what it

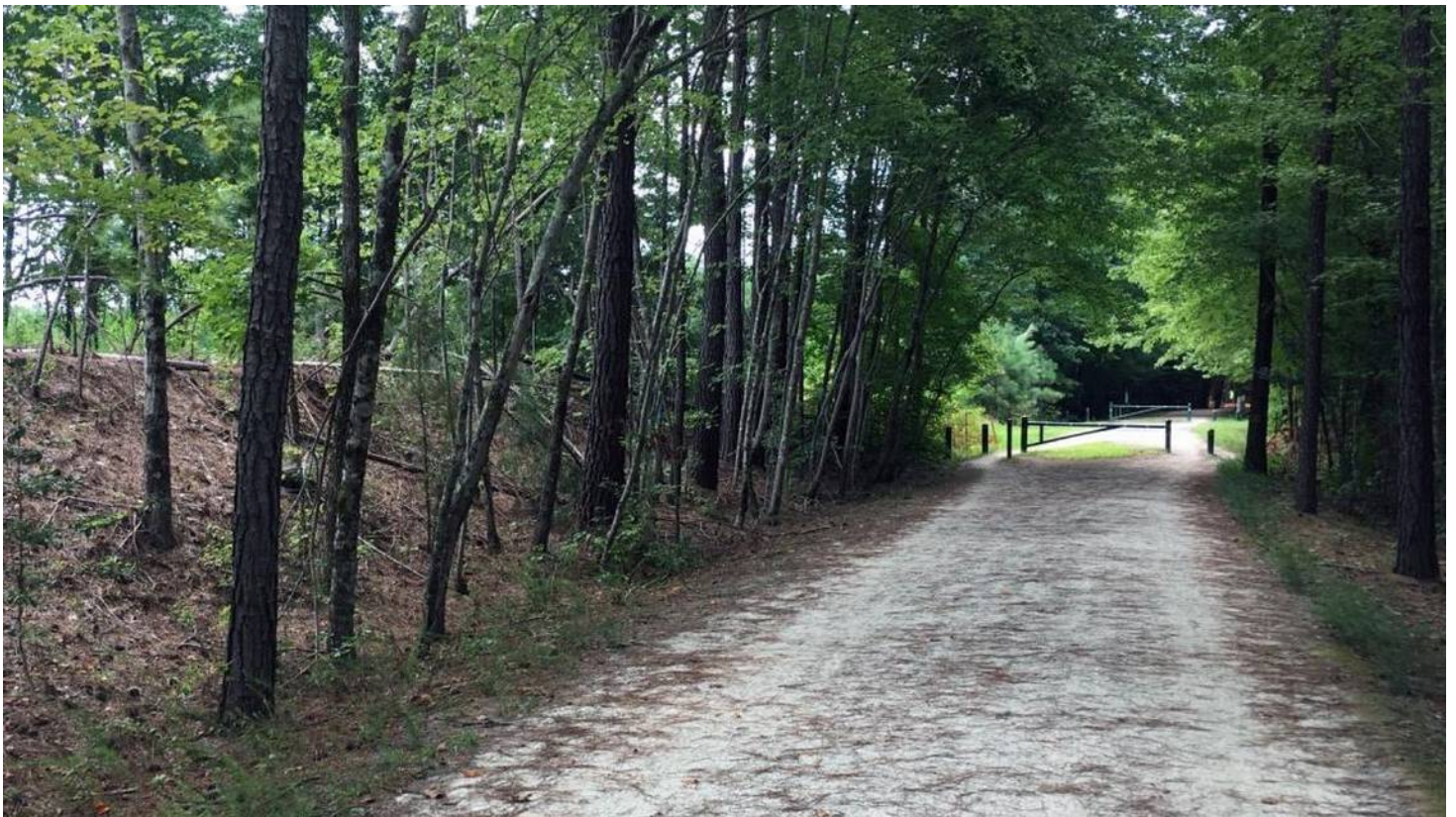


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BY RICHARD STRADLING

MAY 20, 2020 05:30 AM , UPDATED MAY 20, 2020 01:41 PM



The American Tobacco Trail stretches 22 miles through Durham, Chatham and Wake counties. Dominion Energy is considering building a gas pipeline along a six-mile stretch of the trail from Cary to Durham.

TOWN OF CARY *CONTRIBUTED*



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can to ensure the trail remains open during construction and that the feel of the trail is preserved.

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