

Diligence Required to Protect Hill Country from Ill-planned Energy Sprawl

by Bill Neiman

For months, the Clear View Alliance (CVA) has worked diligently to protect the Texas Hill Country from the effects of ill-planned energy sprawl. The first step was convincing the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) and the Public Utility Commission (PUC) to take the time required to expand the study area for siting high-voltage transmission lines. These lines will carry wind energy from the wind farms in West Texas to the urban areas farther east. With careful study, a route that does the least amount of harm to the Texas Hill Country can be determined.

The PUC listened to us and granted a motion that allows LCRA to expand its initial study area to include the I-10 corridor and an existing 138 kV transmission line right-of-way as potential sites for the proposed high-voltage transmission lines. But the work to preserve the natural heritage and character of the Texas Hill Country has just begun.

We will continue to work in the best interest of the Texas Hill Country by supporting research to determine the full societal costs of building the proposed transmission lines through virgin land as opposed to utilizing existing rights-of-way. This research will provide objective information that the LCRA may not have the resources or inclination to gather on its own. It will show that when the full cost of the transmission lines, such as impacts on wildlife habitat, cultural heritage ranches, and potential effects on recreational tourism economies are considered, the shortest route may not be the best or most cost effective.

The CVA also will advocate using tubular monopoles instead of the monstrous industrial lattice towers that the LCRA proposes to support the lines across the Texas Hill Country. We will provide objective information to the PUC demonstrating that the aesthetic benefits of using monopoles outweigh the potential cost difference of using lattice towers.

CVA will also work for just compensation. The LCRA has the power of eminent domain to acquire property to build the transmission line, meaning that the utility can “take” property from anyone who is unwilling to sell voluntarily. In our minds, just compensation means that landowners should receive fair market value for land that is either purchased by LCRA or taken through the use of eminent domain. Just compensation should also address the damage and devaluation to the remainder of the property caused by the transmission line construction.

The impacts of these lines are not limited to Hill Country residents. Soon every Texan who enjoys ‘getting away from it all’ in the beauty of the Hill Country could be affected. Your favorite place to camp, hunt or swim may soon have a transmission line across it.

Because outdoor recreation drives the region’s economic engine, CVA will continue to build relationships with affected communities, like-minded organizations and individuals to work in the Texas Hill Country’s best interest. Together, we will collect information to help ensure that the proposed transmission line ultimately is sited where it does the least amount of damage, and we will make our voices heard. Already, the LCRA has received more comments on this project than any in its history. The utility listened once. Together, we can help ensure its leaders listen again.

As volunteers, this is a huge undertaking. It is taking a significant amount time away from our families, our work and our businesses; however, the sacrifices are worth it. We must continue to be diligent in our efforts to see the transmission lines are sited with precaution and care because the Hill Country gets no ‘do overs.’ This project has the potential to change the face of this beautiful region forever, and we must minimize the scars. Once the lines are built there’s no going back.

Anyone who cares about the unique character, beauty and natural resources of the Hill Country, is invited to join us today. Together, we can make a difference.

Bill Neiman is the president of The Clear View Alliance, Inc., a non-profit formed to raise awareness and working to minimize unintended impacts from the construction of wind transmission lines. For more information on the Clear View Alliance, visit its website at: www.clearviewalliance.org.