

LCRA Open House: Community Values and High Voltage Transmission Lines

By Bill Neiman, President, Clear View Alliance

Citizens of the Hill Country have strong community values. The LCRA and the Public Utility Commission (PUC) take notice when the public stands up and takes pride in its community values.

After reviewing the Competitive Renewable Energy Zones (CREZ) transmission line maps which will be displayed at the Open Houses, it is important that you try to determine which community values may not be able to absorb the disturbance from 18-story, high-voltage transmission lines.

In my community, I recently enjoyed the long, reflective, clear view looking over the Llano River Valley from the cemetery in Little Mexico. Several of the proposed routes will disturb this peaceful valley view.

Another treasure to behold is featured in a portrait inside the Kimble County Courthouse. It's the Teacup Mountain. This incredible landmark will be permanently and irreversibly scarred by the transmission line disturbance. There is so much history there that has to be protected, but who will speak for the mountain?

The views all around historic Ft. McKavitt are treasures we cannot afford desecrate.

Then there is another portrait in the courtroom we must take care of - The waterfalls below Mason Crossing. Have you ever sat in the pools below and watched the sun go down? You can see why those people before us fought so hard for their land and why we need to fight today. LCRA is proposing to cross the river just a few hundred yards west of the falls. Once it is gone, it is gone forever.

These are just a few of the local community values that are threatened where I live. Do you know of others? Please go to www.clearviewalliance.org and tell us what you value in your community.

What to expect at the LCRA open house: These events are not official public meetings or public hearings where the information exchanged becomes part of a public record and requires action and consideration by the state. The Open Houses are informal come-and-go events, where information is dispersed in discreet units at individual stations.

Each station and its attendants have a basic theme and the public is expected to stroll from station to station asking questions. For instance, there may be an exhibit showing the types of poles and towers that could be used for construction, another exhibit regarding electro-magnetic fields, a third exhibit with huge aerial maps showing the potential lines. People are naturally drawn to their particular areas of concern and may completely overlook something that is equally important. At no point, does every person in the room hear the same thing at the same time.

Some common questions are:

What is the difference in cost for using monopoles and lattice towers for construction?

How does the utility choose the best route for transmission lines? What criteria does it follow?

How is the landowner to be fairly compensated for any land taken through the use of eminent domain?

Remember, the answers that you are given are not binding. Without recording the conversations, there is no proof that the exchange ever took place. For future reference, it is important that you document the information that you were provided.

These Open Houses are the initial entry point for the line siting process. While it is important to ask questions and file your comments, these questions and comments do not have to be considered in the decision-making process. Eventually, either the information that has been successfully filed as part of the official docket with the Public Utility Commission or information that has been introduced as part of a

hearing in front of an administrative law judge will come into play.

It is important to get informed and get involved now. We have until July 6 to make a difference for the Hill Country.

What You Need to Know from Someone Who Has Been There:

People across Texas have been dealing with utility companies and potential transmission lines. A fellow supporter of Texas' natural world and open spaces shared the following information with me after his skirmishes with ONCOR (another TX utility) over the building of a high-voltage Competitive Renewable Energy Zones (CREZ) line. He said that I could pass along his experiences, if I thought it might help other landowners and affected parties be prepared.

Open House Comments/Community Values: At the Open Houses, utility companies collect written statements and have participants answer questionnaires. In our experience ONCOR used all the comments taken at the open houses to its advantage, trying to spin them and cherry pick what they wanted to present in testimony regarding our community values.

Community values are one of the factors taken into consideration by the Public Utility Commission when it makes the ultimate routing decision; therefore, everyone in your community who is working for conscientious placement should be prepared to write exactly what your community values are. They also need to be prepared to specify exactly where the utility company needs to avoid and where the community believes the best route to be – and why. Concisely and clearly point out environmental issues and identify scenic views that need to be protected.

As citizens fill out the comment sheets, please know that the information becomes the property of the utility company and, in some local cases; responses on the comment sheets were spun and used against the people who wrote them. The utility companies are masters at dividing and conquering, so be prepared to see the comments used in ways that you never imagined. Think through what you want to say and try to prevent giving the utilities possible ammunition.

NIMBY: Do not waste your time using “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) arguments, they do not work. The utility companies are responsible to the community not to individuals, so affected parties must work together and create “not in my community” arguments. The more people who share the same viewpoints and come to fill out the questionnaires, the better it will be. Do not give them your questionnaires until you have made yourself a copy. Take it home and fill it out, just make sure you mail it in after you make a copy. This is a time for everyone there to get their points on the initial record. Remember this is an open house, not a public meeting, so anything written down does not automatically become part of the public record and does not require the utility or the Public Utility Commission to take specific action.

DOCUMENT THE INFORMATION: Information presented at the Open House, including maps and any notes on the maps, does not automatically become part of the public record, so bring cameras and take pictures of the maps. If there are notes written on the maps, take pictures of those notes as well. As our local process moved forward, ONCOR was unable to “find” its original maps and the information those maps contained. Remember, anything that can't be proved can be denied.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROFESSIONALS: In our experience, environmental attorneys are worth every penny, especially if they have good working relations with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

ENDANGERED SPECIES: Anyone who has endangered species must have objective documentation from an outside expert. The utilities and the Public Utility Commission put very little weight on the experience of private landowners, but seem to value the expertise of professional biologists.

Learn more about this issue from the following resources:

www.hillcountryalliance.org/HCA/ScenicBeauty

www.clearviewalliance.org

www.soshillcountrylorg

www.thcha.org

Below you will find a schedule of Open Houses.

Junction — Monday, Feb. 15; 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Coke R. Stevenson Memorial Center, 440 N. U.S. Highway 83

Menard — Tuesday, Feb. 16; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Menard Community Center, 301 W. Travis St.

Mason — Wednesday, Feb. 17; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Mason Community Building, Fort Mason City Park, 1051 San Antonio St.

Fredericksburg — Thursday, Feb. 18; 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Pioneer Pavilion, 432 Lady Bird Drive

Eldorado — Monday, Feb. 22; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Schleicher County Civic Center, 427 U.S. Highway 277

Kerrville — Tuesday, Feb. 23; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Cailloux Campus Activity Center, 2100 Memorial Blvd., Schreiner University

Sonora — Wednesday, Feb. 24, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Sutton County Civic Center, 1700 N. Crockett Ave.