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### Uncertain PATH

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When we first heard of the PATH project some years ago, it was being touted as absolutely necessary to ensure that adequate power would be available in the region. Without PATH, it was warned, power problems such as brownouts might begin to appear as early as 2014. Under that scenario, PATH's creators, Allegheny Energy and American Electric Power, indicated that the project needed to get a quick green light so that construction could begin.

PATH is not just another run-of-the-mill transmission line. It's 275 miles long, its huge towers would traverse sections of three states, and its terminus would be an enormous substation slated for a parcel off Bartholows Road near Mount Airy. Its cost is estimated at \$1.8 billion, of which a 14.3 percent return on investment is guaranteed by the regional power authority PJM.

All those considerations might not, in and of themselves, be a legitimate reason to say no to this project, at least for now. But something else may be -- whether or not it is as critical to the region's power needs as it was originally billed.

That has evolved into a major issue with PATH. The date by which Allegheny Energy says there will be a critical need for PATH keeps slipping further into the future. First it was 2014, then 2016. Furthermore, PATH proposals submitted to different states at different times have cited different critical-need dates. What is the reality?

Now, several opponents to the project, including Doug Kaplan, president of the Sugarloaf Conservancy, and David O'Leary, the Sierra Club's Maryland conservation chairman, say PJM data indicate that there would not be a critical need for PATH until 2021. If so, that would be seven years later than the first alarmist call for PATH by 2014. At this point the question arises as to whether even the 2021 date could slip further into the future.

That are other concerns associated with PATH, including the huge substation near Mount Airy, which would be near hundreds of houses, and the even bigger issue of whether the goal of moving more and more toward renewable energy sources is consistent with spending the kind of money on this kind of traditional technology. While energy, no matter how it is produced, must be transmitted, renewables are conducive to more and smaller generating stations, that could make big, long-range transmission systems less of a necessity in the future.

PATH seems to be steadily losing the urgency that its promoters initially said existed. If figures from PJM and the Department of Energy show, as Kaplan asserts, that demand for the power that PATH would carry is not needed until 2021, that's a strong argument for putting the project on hold. For how long, only future developments can determine.

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