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Appalachian Power Co. Spends \$82.7 Million on Local Projects

Brian Kelley

Electricity should begin to flow this week to the new Lake Forest substation in Botetourt County, the first of four projects in the Roanoke region that Appalachian Power Co. says are designed to bolster its ability to meet increased demand and to improve reliability.

Appalachian will spend \$82.7 million by the time the projects are completed in 2012. The company then will file a transmission rider with the state to seek to have customers pay for the work, which likely will mean a 7 cent monthly increase for the typical residential customer. That filing will be in addition to the base rate filings the company is required by law to file every two years.

For now, more than 700 people, both from the utility and hired contractors, are working or will work on the projects designed with two purposes in mind: carrying more electrical load, and building so-called "double contingency" reliability to meet updated national standards. That means if one high-voltage line goes down, a second will be available to carry its load.

"It's just unbelievable all the people who touch a project like this," said Shawn Smith, project manager for the Matt Funk and Huntington Court reliability upgrades.

The work amounts to the most substantial physical improvements to the electrical system in the Roanoke area in the past two decades, said Paul Hanson, a senior engineer in asset planning who went to work for the utility in 1990.

"These aren't projects you design overnight," he said. Each has gone through a three-year process, involving meetings with affected



Appalachian Power Co. employees Joseph Ellep (left) and Donald Sterling (right) install power lines on Grove Street. Photo Courtesy: Walter Luther

property owners and residents and obtaining state approval. In two projects, substations were moved from originally proposed locations based on residents' suggestions.

All are designed with the goal of keeping the lights on, the heat pumps humming and industries that employ thousands supplied with power in the face of cars hitting electrical poles, ice and wind storms, lightning and even that bushy-tailed nemesis of reliability, Sciurus carolinensis.

"Squirrels get on the power lines and where do they go? They follow the line back to the substation," Hanson said. To foil them, baffles are installed on the lines outside the substation's fence line.

The projects include:

The newly completed Lake Forest substation, located off Laymantown Road north of Rainbow Forest Baptist Church in Botetourt County. This project will ease the load on an existing substation near the Bonsack Walmart and improve electric service reliability for people who live near Coyne Mountain. The \$12 million project, due to be finished Tuesday, was approved by the state in 2008. It will give the utility another source to switch customers to when an outage occurs and will respond to the area's higher risk for outages -- what spokesman Todd Burns calls the "tree-to-customer ratio." In areas that are heavily forested, there's more chance of an outage caused by fallen trees or limbs.

Sunscape, which is a 1.4-mile, double-circuit link between an existing 138,000-volt line off Starkey Road to a new substation off Ogden Road near Tanglewood Mall, behind Pebble Creek apartments. This \$14.3 million project, approved by the state in 2009, is designed to relieve an electrical system in Southwest Roanoke and Roanoke County serving 11,300 customers that has been overloaded for years. More than 350 workers from several companies are involved in the work, due to be completed in June.

Contractor New River Electrical Corp. this month began erecting 100-foot monopoles to carry the high-voltage lines. Michael Sawchuk, project manager with the Cloverdale-based firm, said the work meant the company didn't have seasonal layoffs this winter. Sawchuk also said he's had some difficulties finding workers locally who have the proper qualifications and can pass a background check.

Cell Phone Use Increases Brain Activity

Study results renew calls for more research into the potential dangers of cell phones

Michelle Sinha

A new study has shown that cell phone use changes brain activity, once again raising the question of whether cell phone radiation can cause long-term brain damage.

Recent research revealed people holding a phone to their ear for 50-minute period saw an increase in brain glucose metabolism, according to a study in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. Based on the study, conducted by the National Institutes of Health, it cannot yet be determined whether there could be long-term damage, such as cancer, from cell phone use.

"The purpose of the study was

to try to find out if the human brain is sensitive to the weak electromagnetic phenomena that are emitted from cell phones," said Dr. Nora Volkow of the National Institutes of Health in a press telebriefing on Thursday. Volkow conducted the randomized study along with other researchers from the

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National Institutes of Health. In the study, 47 healthy people were tested over a one-year period. Participants had cell phones placed on their left

and right ears. One cell phone was activated but muted for 50 minutes, the other was off. After that, the subjects were tested with both cell phones turned off.

With the phones at their ears, the subjects' brains were scanned using a sophisticated imaging technique. Volkow, who conducted the study along with colleagues at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, said the brain scans showed heightened metabolic activity in brain cells closest to the activated devices. "The human brain is sensitive to the electromagnetic radiation that is emitted from cell phones," Volkow said.

While conducting the observations, researchers noticed a significant increase in glucose metabolism in areas of

the brain that were closest to the antenna, Volkow said. Areas that were further away did not show brain activity changes.

"The main things that are coming out of a cell phone are microwaves," said Bradford Barber, a research professor of radiology at the University of Arizona. Barber is also a physicist that develops instrumentation in nuclear medicine and he works with gamma rays.

"There's no clear mechanism for causing cancer with these kinds of microwaves that you would have from a cell phone," he said.

Gamma rays, X-rays and particles found from radioisotopes can cause cancer at very high levels. It seems unlikely for long wave radiation such as radio waves to

County Recommends Redistricting Plan, Public Hearing Scheduled

Rob Chapman

It's not quite a completed process, but Prince Edward is well on its way to approving a redistricting plan some three weeks ahead of schedule.

The County's three-member advisory committee presented a recommendation Tuesday evening and the Board of Supervisors agreed to advertise a public hearing on the proposal for their March 8 meeting.

There will be some changes-as there usually are with growth/shifts in population data as detailed with a census, but at a glimpse the eight electoral districts would appear roughly as they currently exist.

Advisory committee member Paul Hoffman detailed at the Tuesday evening presentation that the committee "basically adopted the same philosophy that you instructed us to do" and outlined that they put a high emphasis on equalizing potential populations; put a lot of emphasis on contiguous boundaries (especially using boundaries that were readily identifiable, known to the community); put a strong focus on not having any retrogression of the minority popularity, especially those districts that have historically had minority majorities; had a goal of keeping polling places in their districts, and a goal of not redistricting supervisors out of their districts.

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to such district. Adding a large number of student population - approximately 1,400 - weights that district to approximately 66 percent white in terms of its demographics.

While Hoffman said "that would not have been our highest and best goal" he offered that they "feel, in terms of those people most likely to turn out to vote, that demographics of that particular district are probably a lot closer to balance than it appears numerically on paper."

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"We had some challenges," Hoffman told the board. "The first and foremost challenge was what we...call the Longwood problem where the Census Bureau put virtually all of the Longwood student population in two census blocks - approximately 201 High Street - which meant that they weren't really distributed over the geography

of the Longwood campus as they actually live, but they were sorta artificially lumped into these two blocks. Also, the Longwood population, at about 2,400, really skewed the population of the Farmville District, so we had a big adjustment to make there...in order to equalize the population."

That, Hoffman also cited, had impacts on the Farmville Center District (801), which has been a historically minority majority or at least close

Va. woman charged in beating death of boyfriend

Duncan Adams

A 29-year-old woman faces a first-degree murder charge in the beating death of her 77-year-old boyfriend in his Bedford County home.

A Bedford County grand jury returned the indictment Tuesday.

Kristina Pongracz previously had been charged with aggravated malicious wounding after a deputy from the Bedford County Sheriff's Office found William Herchenrider bleeding profusely and on all fours May 4 at the large home Pongracz shared with him in Goodview.

Herchenrider survived but spent months in the hospital and an acute-care facility recovering.

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State Legislators Adopt \$80 Billion Budget

Julian Walker

Millions in state funding that local school systems feared they would lose was preserved in the compromise state budget adopted Thursday evening.

The revised two-year spending plan features roughly \$75 million more for public education than the introduced budget.

It includes "hold harmless" funding to help school divisions potentially hurt by declining local revenue and revisions to the local composite index, a complex formula that determines school funding based on measures of community wealth. Gov. Bob McDonnell's budget proposed using that money for other priorities, a move that would have cost school systems in South Hampton Roads.

Enhanced education funding was among many revisions to the blended biennial budget negotiated by House of Delegates and Senate officials, who relied on revenue growth.

The package totaling more than \$80 billion runs through June 30, 2012, and also provides money to improve state mental health services, spur road construction, promote economic development and pump money into state colleges. Legislators unanimously adopted the spending plan, a rarity in recent years when some members of both chambers have dissented.

House Minority Leader Ward Armstrong, D-Henry County, joined the majority in supporting the budget plan, noting that, while he's opposed past budgets, the current plan does "right by schools, police, mental health and all the various things in this budget."

Del. Chris Jones, R-Suffolk, said that even though legislators ended a day behind schedule, they produced a quality spending plan as evidenced by its unanimous passage.

Although lawmakers adjourned Sunday evening after agreeing on the budget, they will return to the Capitol later this year to redraw legislative district boundaries.

The adopted budget provides higher-education funding, including \$13 million to boost undergraduate financial aid for in-state students.

Money is also provided to boost science, math and technology initiatives. And the budget has \$11.5 million to increase the number of full-time faculty members at schools including Old Dominion University.

Some of those provisions fall in line with McDonnell's call for increased investments in higher education as part of a plan to boost degree attainment.

Another \$3 million is built into the plan for Eastern Virginia Medical School, and \$1 million is provided for Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters in Norfolk.

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