

A Power Struggle
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A Power Struggle In Clifton

Switching Station Angers Residents

By D'Vera Cohn
Washington Post Staff Writer

Clifton is the kind of place where people enjoy horse trails, historic houses and other reminders of yesteryear. So what happens when Virginia Power wants to build a giant switching station just outside of town?

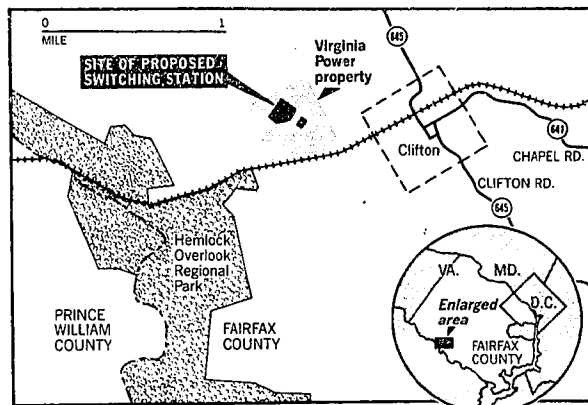
Sparks fly. Thirty-eight acres of forest would be cleared for the 12-acre facility, which would be built on land the power company owns about three-quarters of a mile west of Clifton, bounded by railroad tracks to the south and Ivakota Road to the north.

The switching station would receive power at 500,000 volts and step it down to 230,000 volts for transmission to substations, which lower it still further to a level suitable for residential use. A switching yard would be installed to feed bulk transmission stations to the west or east, depending on where power is needed.

Also proposed on the site, already a power line right-of-way, is a 230,000-volt transmission line between Clifton and Prince William County. In addition, the Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative wants to buy five acres of the land to build a distribution station to serve the immediate area.

"We all love Clifton because it's a historic town," said Melanie Stayne, who often works at home in her public relations business. "It's going to be like having a prison, a rather solid structure surrounded by chain link."

Residents of the three nearby homeowners associations are fighting a sophisticated battle, and have formed an organization called Clifton/Occoquan Preservation Strategists. They enlisted the mayor of Clifton, Wayne Nickum, to join a small picket line outside Virginia Power's annual stockholders' meeting last month. They say they have gathered 500 names on a petition, and are beginning a mail campaign asking residents to write their elected officials. They have a lawyer,



BY DAVE COOK—THE WASHINGTON POST

and Stayne, spokeswoman for the group, said they are prepared to sue.

Virginia Power officials say the switching station is needed by 1991 to keep up with Northern Virginia's growth.

"We have been meeting with citizens groups out there since December, and when they raise concerns we can deal with, we will be glad to respond," said utility spokesman Michael Molloy.

Already, Molloy said, the utility has reduced the height of proposed structures by 25 feet; the tallest is now 75 feet, compared with a 126-foot tower on the site now. Virginia Power also agreed to move the switching station 160 feet back, away from its residential neighbors, he said. The closest home would be more than 550 feet away, the utility said.

But those neighbors are not happy. Stayne likes to point out that the 38 acres of cleared land is larger than the Pentagon's 35-acre building. Enough trees have been cut down at the site already to drive away a herd of deer, she said.

The station will have seven transformers, each containing 10,000 gallons of oil that is used as a coolant, and will be in the Occoquan watershed less than a quarter-mile from a creek, she said. Residents are concerned about a spill of oil and about risks to the fragile area, on which development was deliberately restricted by the county. The watershed includes 41,000 acres in rural southwestern Fairfax County.

"Once this is done, this will be the coattail that all the developers will attach themselves to," she said.

Two 30-inch natural gas pipelines run underground a few feet from the switching station, posing a danger of gas leaks from construction or other activity at the switching station, said another neighbor, Frank Gallegos. He said he also is

worried about electromagnetic radiation.

Gallegos and Stayne said Virginia Power has been less than candid about its plans for the site, repeatedly saying it had no plans for major development on land it has owned since 1973. Molloy said that is not true: "We've made it clear from the start that our plans were to develop that site for a major transmission station and substation."

Molloy said the oil in the transformers is nontoxic and the station will have an oil containment system.

The utility already has two substations in the watershed without major environmental problems of the sort the Clifton opponents describe, such as toxic oil spills, he said. "Yes, sometimes things happen at substations, but when they do, we clean them up pretty quick," he said.

Molloy said that the utility has other facilities closer to natural gas pipelines than the Clifton facility would be, and that engineering studies have shown that the new switching station would add no more electromagnetic radiation than is already present on the site.

The utility expects to apply for a state Corporation Commission permit within 90 days. The switching station also will need a special exception zoning permit from Fairfax County, which will require a public hearing.

The switching station's opponents say they won't oppose all development at the site; the proposed five-acre substation would be fine, they say. They hope to persuade Virginia Power to sell the land to a developer of large lots, and to find an alternate site for the switching station.

"We will be considering alternatives," Molloy said. "We're not having second thoughts on the site, but we're going to evaluate alternatives as part of the formal [application] process we're now beginning."

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