

Duke's line plans threaten land deals

tmaxwell@citizen-times.com

In May, Charles Jackson kissed his wife goodbye and loaded into a friend's dump truck, intending to return with gravel to repair the driveway's divots and stretches of raw dirt.

Neither man came home. Their dump truck clipped a tractor trailer on Interstate 26, not far from the Jackson's Campobello, South Carolina, house.

On that fine spring afternoon, Gayle Jackson became a widow. And in the way that tragedy tends to compound itself, her heartache and worries soon doubled.

In the weeks after her husband's death, their regal, antebellum home and its 22 acres weighed on her with an unblinking math. The mortgage was being paid with her husband's income, now gone, from his electrical contracting business in Arden, North Carolina.

She put it on the market, and soon came a couple from Charleston, who were charmed by a historical house that once served as the hub for a tobacco plantation, and by its heartwood pine floors that have borne footfalls for more than two centuries: She liked the pastureland for her horses; he fell under the spell of an aged log cabin sitting nearby with red clay chinking, begging for renovation.

Amid Jackson's attempt to recalibrate her life at the age of 60, the deal seemed like a near-certain and much-needed refuge.

And then in July, Duke Energy revealed a web of proposed routes that would run 230-kilo-volt transmission lines from Campobello to Asheville, chilling Jackson's sale. Though the nearest possible route is miles from Jackson's home, the Charleston couple, concerned about impacts to the view, decided to hold off on an offer until Duke settles on a route.

It is a mode familiar to real estate agents and their clients who hope to sell properties along possible transmission line corridors in five Carolinas counties. "I had planned on staying with Charlie forever, but that's not going to happen so I need to move on with my life," Jackson said. "I just wish they would make a decision so I could go on."

The decision Jackson hopes Duke will make soon is to choose a single transmission line route – one that will run about 45 miles – among the dozens of segment possibilities the company unveiled a month ago. The transmission lines are necessary, according to Duke, to meet rising power needs in Western North Carolina.

Ahead of Duke's decision, expected in early October, opposition groups are preparing for "not in my backyard" fights against the nation's largest power company.

In the meantime, Jackson and sellers like her are waiting to find out what, if any, financial toll their homes and land might bear with a concrete decision from Duke.

For many of them, transmission towers and lines that exist only on paper – and most will never come to fruition – are casting a shadow that will stretch into autumn, when a decision is made.

That decision previously had been set for January, but Duke officials announced they had hired more staff and would shorten the timeline to October to help relieve some stress for homeowners.

'PERCEPTION IS REALITY'

Some home-buyers seeking to purchase lifestyle that hinges on views

Riders have long guided horses along bridle paths in Polk County, but the area saw a revitalization in a slumping real estate economy in early 2014, with the opening of the Tryon International Equestrian Center.

Equestrians searching for horse farms and grazing pastures had driven that uptick, but just 18 months later, sales there are stalling with uncertainty about the transmission lines.

Many real estate agents have stories of sales lost or on hold, including Polk County Commissioner Ray Gasperson, who has a real estate agency with his daughter.

"She got a call from the buyer's agent on a property we have near Mills Springs and she told me, 'Duke Energy just killed the deal,'" he said. That property, a 5-acre horse farm, was about a half-mile from transmission lines routes, he said, not within Duke's 1,000-foot study area, but close enough to trouble the buyer.

To look at where lines might run in Polk County is to know that Duke is considering paths that would slice through central portions of the rural county, home to about 20,000 people.

Buyers come to Polk County to purchase not just a property, Gasperson said, but a lifestyle that hinges on scenic vistas and tree-covered slopes, rural ideals that are getting tangled in the threat of transmission lines.

To ask Gasperson about the impact the proposal has had in Polk will launch him into a 20-minute answer about the county's communities and landmarks that have been hit along each route:

"It will go right through the middle of Bright's Creek, and that area has gone through a lot of ups and downs as a result of his horrific recession, and they're just now coming back in a strong way," he said of the tony, gated community. "And here you've got the potential of these large transmission lines and towers coming through the middle of it, and you can imagine that's been devastating for them."

Home-buyers, who often are making the biggest investment of their lives, are a notoriously finicky lot.

The impact of proposed transmission line routes, whether or not they cross within view of a property, is like beauty: It's in the eye of the beholder, said Lou Lipomi, an Upstate real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Caine.

"The perception is the reality," he said.

Lipomi's regions include The Cliffs upscale communities, and the most southern proposed route would cut through The Cliffs at Glassy in Landrum and The Cliffs Valley in Travelers Rest, where Lipomi also lives.

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One couple from New Hampshire stopped a potential purchase, though transmission towers would not be visible from the home, and two Cliffs-selling clients told Lipomi to put their sales on the back-burner until Duke reaches a decision.

"In communities like the two Cliffs; it affects everybody whether lines wouldn't be visible from the house or if they come right over the house and land. People strongly believe the lines will hurt property values in the entire community," he said of a sentiment he's heard from neighbors and potential buyers.

He, like other real estate agents, said he is disclosing the line routes, but until a decision is made, sales are largely in a holding pattern.

Gayle Jackson, middle, looks down the gravel lane leading to her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801. The gravel lane signifies the reason her husband Charles Jackson is no longer with her. He left to pick up a load of gravel to fill holes and never returned after he was killed in an auto accident. Gayle talks about why taking care of the 22-acre lot is not an option for her anymore on Tuesday. Her realtor, Linda Noble Tinkler, left, of Keller Williams Realty in Tryon, says they had a buyer but due to the proposed Duke power lines, the buyer has decided to wait on the purchase. Myrna Viehman, right, a realtor with Tryon Foothills Realty, says she also has had buyers stall on purchasing properties due to the proposed lines. The historic 1801 tobacco plantation home owned by Gayle Jackson sits on a hill above 22 acres in Campobello on Tuesday.

Inside the historic 1801 tobacco plantation home owned by Gayle Jackson on a hill above 22 acres in Campobello on Tuesday.

Linda Noble Tinkler, right, of Keller Williams Realty in Tryon, says the firm had a buyer for Gayle Jackson's home but due to the proposed Duke Energy power line,s the buyer has decided to wait on the purchase. Myrna Viehman, left, a realtor with Tryon Foothills Realty, says she also has had buyers stall on purchasing properties due to the proposed lines.

Gayle Jackson, right, talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801.

Gayle Jackson talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801. The threat of Duke Power lines going through her property has left her property unsellable.

Gayle Jackson talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801. The threat of Duke Power lines going through her property has left her property unsellable at the moment.

A window inside the historic 1801 tobacco plantation home owned by Gayle Jackson looks out on a gravel lane that leads to her home that sits on a hill above 22 acres in Campobello .

Gayle Jackson talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801. The gravel lane that leads to her home that she drives everyday signifies the reason her husband Charles Jackson is no longer with her. He left to pick up a load of gravel to fill holes and never returned after a car accident.

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Linda Noble Tinkler, right, of Keller Williams Realty in Tryon, says the firm had a buyer for Gayle Jackson's home but due to the proposed Duke Energy power lines, the buyer has decided to wait on the purchase.

Gayle Jackson talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801. A historic cabin sits just below the back door of Gayle Jackson's historic 1801 tobacco plantation home in Campobello . Initials and names can be found in three separate bricks on Gayle Jackson's tobacco plantation home built in 1801.

Gayle Jackson talks about the upkeep on her historic tobacco plantation home built in 1801.

UNDER THE WIRE

Worries about health, land value emerge

The way Lawrence Katz sees it, he and his wife came in on the wrong side of the wire, and for that he holds Duke responsible.

The couple closed on an Arden home in May, tempted to the mountains from Florida by better weather and trout streams. They intended to retire in this modest neighborhood that is also home to young families and single people.

"My next move is to the crematorium," Lawrence Katz said, sipping red wine and teasing his wife about her bird seed budget.

Shortly after they began settling into their dream retirement home, the couple received a letter from Duke that their house was within 500 feet of a proposed line, known as segment 17B.

Now, courtesy of an area grassroots group, the roads outside their subdivision are lined with red signs with white letters that tell passing motorists, "Tell Duke Energy NO to 17B. Save our Mountains!"

The Katzes' home and their Covington Crossing subdivision would be bordered by transmission lines to the north and east should segment 17B be chosen. Lawrence Katz looks to Duke's own recent real estate purchase of land in Campobello , where the company will site a substation.

"Duke closed on that South Carolina property in March, and if they would have been ethical in what they were planning, we would have never bought here," he said. "We will lose value right out of the gate. I look out here and see the trees and think about what it could look like if it's bare and that's a central stressor."

Next door to Covington Crossing sits Hyde Park, a development still under construction that will feature about 60 homes in an Arts and Crafts style.

That same transmission line route would slice through that neighborhood, which began being cleared more than three years ago. Duke officials have said they relied on satellite images that are one or two years old to draw routes, but Duke's online map predates Hyde Park, showing it as a field with an older home.

The developer has spoken with the power company and provided them with updated maps, said Donette Moore, a Beverly Hanks agent who is handling sales in the subdivision.

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Sales are continuing, she said, and she is directing clients to Duke's website to look at the transmission line route.

"At this point it's not a negative impact. Because of those lot sizes, they are looking at having to buy several homes to get that right of way to work," she said. "I don't think it's going to happen. I'm sure if it does, it will be a huge impact on several homes, but I just don't see Duke buying several new homes that have been lived in for less than a year."

In Hendersonville, Jodi Maney lives in a Habitat for Humanity community, one that has a proposed line running to the north.

She and her husband moved their two boys into the home three years ago, looking forward to resetting their lives after a son's medical issues left the family financially strapped.

Maney worries her boys and the neighborhood kids will climb towers and have health issues should the transmission line come their way, but she sees no escape route.

The family has lived in the Habitat house for three years, and Maney said should they try to sell before a five-year mark, they will lose all investment they've put into the home.

Duke officials have extended a public comment deadline to Aug. 31 because of overwhelming response, and Maney said she first brought the issue up at an informational session the company hosted.

"They said they wanted to know we were in a Habitat community," she said. "They said that was important to know things like that, but I don't know what they do with that information. We can't just pick up and leave. It's not an option for us."

Linda Noble Tinkler, of Keller Williams Realty in Tryon, says the firm had a buyer for Gayle Jackson's home but due to the proposed Duke Energy power lines, the buyer has decided to wait on the purchase. MYKAL McELDOWNEY/The Greenville News

DECISIONS

Duke cites obligation in meeting growing regional power demand

Duke officials have said they are gathering public comment to better inform their decision-making on route options, and they have asked for locations that might be ecologically or culturally significant, have important view sheds or new homes that did not appear on maps.

The company has followed an industry standard in releasing a map that proposes several routes, said Tom Williams, a Duke spokesman.

"We regret the uncertainty this has caused people through this process," he said. "But the power demand has increased and it's going to continue to increase and we have an obligation to meet those needs."

Real estate agents also have an obligation to inform a property buyer of issues that may affect the property, and on July 20 – less than a week after Duke unveiled

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the possible routes – Linda Tinkler, of Keller Williams Realty, sent an email to Myrna Viehman, the Tryon Foothills Realty agent representing Gayle Jackson.

Tinkler's clients had spent hours at the antebellum home, looking up fireplaces, admiring the paneled walls, talking with Jackson, and until the Duke news, were readying an offer.

"They love the farm and think it would be a perfect fit for them, but (they) are so worried about having the lines in the view behind the house, and the possibility that they could be moved to the south to protect the Caroland and Jackson Grove area, and instead be right in their own backyard," Tinkler wrote in that July email.

In recent days, the two real estate agents met at Jackson's home, frustrated by the lines, and particularly Jackson's situation. "It's tying our hands," Tinkler said. "The kind of people who want to buy a historical home, who are willing to invest in its upkeep, are going to also value vistas and the beauty of the area. Those things go hand in hand."

Jackson also had been delighted with Tinkler's clients, pleased that a couple who understood the treasure that is her home would be its custodians.

But now, as she waits for a Duke decision, she looks to the upkeep she will have to maintain without her life partner. There is grass to Mow now, wood to chop for winter heat.

And the driveway, a quarter-mile long, remains unpatched. For Jackson, to drive that stretch is to be reminded of her husband, who, on a fine spring day, did not come home from a trip to purchase gravel.

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Brent R. Brian
Martha M. Brian
BrianMitchellGenealogy@gmail.com