

SETTLE WOODSTOCK HIGHWAY DISPUTE

High Tension Lines Kept Away from Pemi River

by Terrence Briggs

On January 28 at a meeting in North Woodstock's white clapboard firehouse, meeting hall and courtroom, men from the State Highway Department met with a few local people about the replacement of high-tension lines along Interstate 93.

It was a friendly meeting, but the result contradicted every precedent in the history of bureaucratic-citizen confrontation. The people won.

Why they won is a difficult question to answer. I'll outline the problem before trying to answer it.

Interstate 93, part of the federal highway system, is being constructed from Campton thru Franconia Notch where it will join an already completed section of the road.

The highway has engendered many disputes. Where to place interchanges—each town wants one for its tourist business, but no man wants it on his property. The configuration of the Notch portion has yet to be decided, and has become a battleground for promoters, conservationists, and engineers.

This particular skirmish concerns high-tension lines which presently run on the east side of Rte. 175, exactly where I-93 is to be built in Woodstock.

Because the power company now owns this land and because the State is taking it, it is the responsibility of the State to obtain other land for the use of the power company.

USE FLOOD PLAIN

In the interest of esthetics and thrift it was decided to place the lines along the flood plain of the Pemigewasset River. It would be cheap because there would have to be less cutting and clearing than in the woods. The Highway Department felt that it would be esthetically acceptable because the wires would be nearly invis-

ible from both the Interstate highway, their main concern because it is a tourists conduit, and Rte. 3 which is on the west side of the river.

Before the plans were made public, men from the department visited landowners and asked permission to survey their river-front land. They then revealed, in part, the plans for the land. Reaction was unanimously unfavorable.

For one, the Pemigewasset River, at the head of the heavily polluted Merrimack River Valley, has carried untreated industrial wastes for decades. Within the past few months, however, work was completed on a sewerage treatment plant at the Franconia Paper Company, major polluter of the upper valley. For the first time this century, river frontage would be useful and valuable.

The discovery that it was to be "desecrated" shocked the town. The Selectmen were disturbed because their tax base would be further eroded—they were already losing land for the highway. Sportsmen and businessmen had been looking forward to the day when there would be salmon in the river again. Landowners could see the value of their property increasing. Their hopes and plans seemed to be dashed.

THE PEOPLE UNITE

Although there was no organized opposition, the people soon coalesced around Dick Hamilton, Executive Director of Ski 93 and a leader of the conservation-oriented public relations men in the North Country. Letters began to bombard newspapers, State Representatives, State Senators, the Executive Council, the Governor, and the Highway Department itself.

Highway Department Commissioner Robert Whitaker called a meeting at his office in December to explain the department's initial plans for the power lines and its proposals dealing with the road to go through Franconia Notch. Dick Hamilton, Executive Councilor Stephen Smith, conservation leaders and members of the press were invited. Commissioner Whitaker said that plans for removal of the power lines were not definite, and would be carefully studied before a final decision was made.

The commissioner was reminded of strong local sentiment against his and the power company's plan. In fact, the opposition was much deeper than his letters had suggested—the people were determined that the power lines would not deface their land or the river.

EXAMINE ALTERNATIVES

During the rest of December and much of January the department examined all the alternatives to the flood plain scheme. At the January meeting in Woodstock they placed these alternatives before Town officials. The Selectmen would have the power to choose the plan they deemed best for the town.

By this time the original plan had been abandoned. One alternative route for the lines placed them entirely within the flood plain. The earlier plan had moved them away in some spots to avoid complications with the railroad. This plan was objectionable to the townspeople for the very reasons that the original one had been.

Plans to bury the lines were rejected immediately because the cost, \$1-million per mile—was considered excessive. Also rejected by the department was a suggestion that the lines be located west of Route 3, the rough terrain made the expense prohibitive.

A second alternative placed the lines to the east of Route 175, but out of sight of drivers on I-93. It would be expensive and require the consent of the National Forest Service which owned twenty percent of the land.

ACCEPT BURDEN

Because of the added cost, it would be necessary to retain the substation in Woodstock which would have been moved to Camp-ton had the flood plain plan been accepted. It was a burden the people were ready to accept.

There also would be a delay in beginning the installation of the power lines, it was pointed out, because negotiations would have to be initiated between the state and the Forest Service. The people were willing to wait.

Once the Forest Service gives its approval, which is by no means certain, and the Bureau of Public Roads, a federal agency, gives its okay, the project will go ahead.

AFFECTS HIGHWAY

After their presentation on the power lines, the Highway Department officials announced that part of Route 175 will be eliminated. This problem was necessitated not by bureaucratic needs, but by engineering standards for construction of I-93.

Original plans of the Highway Department had called for the construction of I-93 to the west of 175. There would have been minor changes in 175, but it would have covered the same distance and territory it now serves.

Engineering studies by the department showed that at the Tripoli Road there would have to be cuts as deep as 120 feet into the side of the mountain. In order to assure the safety of the road they would have to scarp the mountain to its top to prevent it from possibly sliding into the road.

The northbound lane was placed where the southerly one had been planned. The southbound lane was placed directly over the

present 175. There was no room to continue 175 between the covered bridge and the Tripoli Road.

The plan as it now stands calls for little cutting into the mountain, but, rather, vast amounts of filling, some small part of which will be in the river.

There will also be an interchange at the Tripoli Road. This will serve Waterville Valley when the road is made serviceable for winter use, and make it easier for tourists to use the present road and National Forest lands during the months when they are open.

As a result of the removal of the power lines and the elimination of parts of 175, Commissioner Whitaker has had to retract a promise he made when I-93 was being laid out. It was his idea to construct a service road to open up the lands east of the highway. Now, with the power lines running through that area, it has little development value there.

SAVE COVERED BRIDGE

The covered bridge off 175 will be saved, although traffic will run on a steel structure, to be built about 400 feet below the covered bridge, to connect 175 with Route 3. There will be access to the covered bridge so that it may be utilized as a minipark by tourists.

The reaction to this disclosure was generally unfavorable. Some objected to the removal of valuable lands from the tax rolls. It will also necessitate a new longer more expensive school bus route, and make it difficult for people living east of the river to get back and forth to Woodstock.

The evidence that the Highway Department presented was much more convincing than the case it originally made for the power lines. And, there is no way to build the road and retain 175 as it now exists without filling in the river.

However, if the townspeople's victory on the power lines is any precedent, the Highway Department can look for strong opposition to this plan as well.

PEOPLE POWER

The fact that is most striking about the entire encounter is that voters armed with nothing but determination can sway the expertise and bureaucratic power of a giant, wealthy and heretofore unassailable department of the government.

This leads into the why of the decision to allow the Selectmen the final word on the placement of the lines. There are several possibilities:

1) This is an election year, and the Governor must take the side of the people. There has been a lot of talk about the encroachments of the state government upon the prerogatives of the people.

2) The alternative chosen by the Selectmen is not much more expensive for the state, and while revenues from tourist's use of the river cannot be forecast accurately, it will surely become an important fishing spot when its waters are finally clean. Trout have already been stocked.

3) From the Power company's point of view, it will be expensive to cut the clearances its lines require, but this cost will certainly be passed along to its customers, and it will not be out of pocket. It could be difficult to work on the power lines in the flood plain anyway if there was high water. The new route will not present that problem.

4) The people of Woodstock were willing to chance delay of the road, and pay possibly higher

costs for electricity to protect their land. These facts could not have been lost on any official in this year of the politicization of environmental protection.

Even with these reasons, all of which are just possibilities, it remains most impressive that the people were able to win. It is of great importance that this is the first clear and definitive victory against either the highway lobby or a public utility. They lost only prestige, but it is a first step.

For decades roads and power lines have scarred the landscape, always in the name of progress. The people are now beginning to ask if it was progress or greed. Many have decided it was the latter. And they have just begun to fight.