

Pipeline comments in sterilized form

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When people gather in the presence of public officials to voice their support — or more typically, their opposition — to an idea or proposal that will in some way affect their lives, the result can be loud, rowdy, raucous or angry. Tempers can flare and raw emotions can be laid bare at any type of public meeting or hearing involving a large number of residents with a common grievance.

This is the essence of democracy. It is not always neat and tidy, nor is it supposed to be. Emotion is part of the mix. How people feel about a particular subject can best be captured not only in the words they speak but in the manner in which they speak them.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which is taking public comment on the proposed and highly controversial PennEast natural gas pipeline, effectively has taken the emotion out of those comments. To gauge reaction to the pipeline, which would run for about 115 miles from Luzerne County to Mercer County, New Jersey, and traverse a small section of Upper Bucks, the FERC is holding a series of comment sessions, one of which was held Tuesday night at Peddler's Village in Buckingham. By no definition could you term the FERC event a "public hearing."

Rather, individuals wishing to express an opinion on the project were ushered one by one into a closed room and given three to five minutes to speak their piece to a stenographer hired by the FERC, which last month issued a Draft Environmental Impact Statement in favor of the pipeline. No one else, from the public or the press, was permitted to hear each person's comments.

We assume the stenographer dutifully and accurately recorded all the words. Without emotion. Without passion. Without the feelings that prompted each person to show up in the first place. These are people who are worried the pipeline poses a genuine threat to the environment, specifically water supplies and the Delaware River. They're worried about its effects on farms and businesses. They fear pipeline leaks and explosions.

The project has its advocates as well: those who believe it will be good for the economy and create jobs.

All of their comments were recorded by a stenographer hearing only words and getting them all down to produce a sterile, emotionless transcript.

The FERC defended its process as a "more efficient way and convenient way for people to provide their comments," a FERC spokeswoman said. Less messy, too. But less democratic, certainly. And incapable of capturing true, unfiltered feeling, "the power of raw emotion" as one anti-pipeline activist noted.

The FERC spokeswoman said the comment process enhances public participation and maximizes the number of people who can comment.

But whether people are speaking up at one of the sessions, or online or through the mail as they're also permitted to do, every comment — whether for or against, whether well-reasoned or otherwise — in the end comes out as the same flat collection of words, to be forwarded to the commission in Washington and posted online.

This might be efficient. It might be convenient. But it's not the democratic way.

http://www.theintell.com/opinion/editorial/pipeline-comments-in-sterilized-form/article_909c8daa-5553-5b09-a50e-2a7b20c59cfb.html