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BUSINESS

# Groups against new gas pipelines protest in Albany



**Larry Rulison**

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Irene Weiser outside the Albany Capital Center on Monday. She said National Grid tried to deny her entry into an energy conference over her views on the environment.

By Larry Rullison

*Albany*





Environmental groups seeking to eliminate the use of fossil fuels like natural gas to heat homes assembled outside in Albany on Monday to call on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to block the expansion of the Williams Cos. gas pipeline into New York City, as well as a new National Grid pipeline bringing gas into Rensselaer County.

Their choice of gathering outside of the Albany Capital Center was not by accident. Inside, National Grid was hosting a conference dedicated to its "80-by-50" program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

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While that is a noble cause, many environmental groups are upset that National Grid is using the expansion of its natural gas transmission network to try and achieve those goals.

Lee Ziesche, a community organizer for the Sane Energy Project, one of several environmental groups that joined the rally, said that the state was at a "crossroads" in its energy policy regarding fossil fuels. Sane Energy Project is part of a broader coalition called Stop the Williams Pipeline.

"We are either going down the path of 100 percent renewable energy or we are going to be spending billions of dollars going in the wrong direction building out fracked-gas infrastructure," Ziesche said, pointing to the Albany Capital Center's main entrance. "Inside, National Grid is talking about their pathway to get there. As long as that pathway includes fracked gas pipelines, it's not a path we want to be on."

The Williams pipeline expansion, technically called the Northeast Supply Enhancement project, includes 23 miles of pipeline in New York Harbor and past Coney Island and the Rockaways.

After getting approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on May 3, the project is now facing a decision from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.



National Grid supports the Williams pipeline expansion, saying it "aligns" with its 80-by-50 program, which is designed to stop the advancement of climate change from the burning of fossil fuels and the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The burning of natural gas produces less CO<sub>2</sub> than than oil or coal, making it the "cleanest" of the fossil fuels.

And locally, National Grid is planning a \$70 million expansion of its local gas transmission network. Known as the Albany Loop project, the new seven mile National Grid line would run from Bethlehem to North Greenbush under the Hudson River.

Groups like the Stop the Williams Pipeline coalition support the use of electric heat pumps to heat homes instead of using natural gas furnaces.

National Grid also supports the use of heat pumps but also the conversion of oil heat customers to natural gas as well, in what is a dual strategy.

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Joining Monday's rally was another group called Mothers Out Front, which opposes National Grid's Albany Loop project in addition to the Williams pipeline expansion.

Megan Root, a local organizer with Mothers Out Front, said the Albany Loop project is not necessary, even though National Grid has said it is needed for reliability as the demand for gas increases with new development in the Capital Region.

"Why are we going to put a new pipeline in?" Root said. "It just doesn't make sense. We don't get why this pipeline is happening."

Root and others at Monday's rally walked petitions from the Albany Capital Center to Cuomo's office on the second floor of the Capitol. The petition asked for the governor to not only block the new natural gas pipelines proposed in the state but to also consider pushing for building codes that effectively ban the use of fossil fuel heating devices in new construction.



David Bertola, a National Grid spokesman, said that while the utility is looking for new ways to heat homes, it has a legal obligation to ensure a reliable system today.

"The bottom line is that without the needed gas supply, new customers and economic development projects may go elsewhere or may resort to less clean alternatives," Bertola said. "In the near term, our initiatives will satisfy customer demand, support the region's economic vitality and prepare us for the clean energy future."

Cuomo's press office referred all questions about the Williams project to the DEC. National Grid's Albany Loop project is currently under review by the state Public Service Commission.

DEC spokeswoman Erica Ringewald said the agency has yet to make a final decision on the project's water quality certificate and other permits.



"DEC will continue to rigorously evaluate these applications to protect public health and the environment and to ensure all applicable standards are met," Ringewald said.

Meanwhile, one of the protesters who attended the rally, Irene Weiser of Fossil Free Tompkins, said she was denied entry into the National Grid conference even though she had signed up as an attendee.

"The fact that they detained me (from going into the conference) is because they are scared of us," Weiser said. "They are scared of the power. They are scared of what we know."

Bertola, the National Grid spokesman, said that Weiser wasn't on the attendee list because the conference had been rescheduled from February due to bad weather on the original conference date.

"Irene was among a small group of registrants who, upon checking in today, were told that they weren't registered," Bertola said. "This was due to a breakdown of our registration process due in part to the event being rescheduled. After this was cleared up, Irene and the others were welcome to enter."





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