

**Date:** July 12, 2016

**To:** Honorable Members of the City Council, Macclenny (Baker County) FL

**From:** Sonja Peterson-Lewis, Baker County native/property owner/concerned citizen  
(Speter01@Temple.edu; 6200 Wayne Avenue, Philadelphia PA 19144; (215) 848-1280)

**Re:** The Department of Environmental Protection's approval of Florida Power and Light's Duval-to-Raven Road High Voltage Transmission Line Plan

Dear Members of the Macclenny City Council:

Thank you for this opportunity to address this esteemed body. I regret that I cannot be with you in person; I was home in Macclenny until mid June, but am now tending a back injury in Pennsylvania where I work. I write to ask your intervention in a matter that will affect the long-term well being of residents. It is my understanding that no telephone hook-up is available, so City Manager Phil Rhoden kindly offered to read my statement to you. You are uniquely positioned to help in this issue given your status with the Florida Power and Light Duval-to-Raven Road expansion plan.

### **The Issue**

As I understand it, on June 29, 2016, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection approved Florida Power and Light's (FPL's) proposal to place 230 kilovolt (high voltage) transmission lines near several residential areas and businesses in Baker County as part of its Duval-to-Raven Road Expansion plan. Affected areas include Powell's Bluff, Wolfe Subdivision, several businesses, a public housing complex, Knabb's Addition, Lewis Subdivision, and perhaps others. Some of these areas—Lewis Subdivision and Knabb's Addition among them—have borne high voltage lines for nearly thirty (30) years--since 1989.

Since receiving on November 10, 2015 FPL's letter to property owners near its planned high voltage corridor, I have read over fifty research articles and regulatory papers <sup>1</sup> on high voltage lines, with special focus on the effects of the electromagnetic fields (EMFs) and radiation such lines produce. Although many researchers avoid declaring outright that exposure to radiation and pollutants from high voltage transmission lines directly cause cancers, memory loss, Alzheimer's Disease, cardiac irregularities, respiratory/breathing disorders such as asthma and other ailments, numerous researchers in medical, engineering, and environmental sciences do conclude that people who live, work, or otherwise spend significant time within certain distances of these lines have increased risk for developing these and other disorders. In adults, the risks tend to show up over time after 10, 15, 20 years or longer; however, children and some other vulnerable populations tend to show effects more rapidly. At high levels, radiation exposure has been linked to miscarriage and sterility. The

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<sup>1</sup>(e. g., *Chapter 62-814 Electric and Magnetic Fields*, <http://dep.state.fl.us/legal/rules/siting/62-814.pdf> )

document *Chapter 62-814 Electric and Magnetic Fields*, found through the Florida DEP website and footnoted below states:

Although there is evidence of biological effects and a potential for adverse health effects on public, there is *no conclusive evidence* that there is any danger or hazard to public health at the levels of electric and magnetic fields permitted by the standards set forth in this chapter.

Often, the reason for the argument that there is “no conclusive evidence” about a certain processes or substances (for example, smoking, asbestos, concussions, lead paint) is because no one is consistently monitoring the effects. Yet, although researchers try to avoid declaring a direct causal relationship between exposure to high voltage line radiation and illness, most researchers agree that (1) the more distance you can put between yourself and high voltage lines, the better, and (2) high voltage lines, like many questionable environmental projects, are often placed in the path of least resistance—often near people who are perceived as being unlikely or unable stand to fight back against being put at risk. Thus, risk often ends up being unevenly distributed based on socio-economic class, race, national origins, education level and other factors. However, once planted, risk often blossoms and spreads to other areas. Risk can also sprout branches. For example, Knabb’s Addition and Lewis Subdivision not only bear the burden of high voltage lines, but also of a nearby water treatment plant and a nearby city dump. This is troubling because such placement seems to shrug off the historical significance of many of the affected areas. Lewis Subdivision, for example, is the first community in Macclenny developed specifically to allow persons of African descent the opportunity to own homes. In addition, although the old Babytowne near Jonathan Street housed the first teachers of newly Africans in the area, Lewis Subdivision was home to W. C. “Captain” Brown--the man credited with building the first school for freedmen and freedwomen in Macclenny.

### **Environmental Justice**

The U.S. Department of Environmental Protection (<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>) defines *environmental justice* as

“the fair treatment and meaningful involvement [emphasis mine] of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

My reading of the research and discussions with professionals led to my opposition of high voltage lines within one-half mile of residential and work communities. I explained this opposition to FPL by phone during their November 12, 2015 Agricultural Center Open House; in numerous email exchanges and telephone conversations with FPL representatives; by letter and email to the Florida Public Service Commission; to the Department of Environmental Protection and, with seven other citizens, to the Department of Environmental Protection Siting Board. Because research says that hazards associated with high voltage lines can vary depending upon season, number of users and one's proximity to the line, I have raised with each of these parties questions about whether the lines and health of people near the lines have been/are being monitored. To date, I have received absolutely no answers to these questions.

In late April 2016, as a response to persistent concerns about EMF levels near residents' homes, FPL representatives agreed that when I could get to Florida in late May, they and I could walk through the community and test EMF fields in yards. They also met with a group of residents. Two days before my arrival in Florida, an FPL representative notified me that the plan for measuring EMFs was canceled—although they still wanted to meet with me. No one explained why. I came to Florida and I met briefly with a cordial FPL representative. However, concerned about FPL's reasons for canceling our agreement to measure EMF levels at my home and others, I have not spent a full day at my home in Macclenny since that day. This is a major problem because prior to learning of FPL's expansion plans, I arranged to work in Baker County all summer and next year to finish two projects, among them the research and interviews for a book/documentary about the area. FPL's cancellation raised concerns that led to my observing neighborhoods and talking to community people. I visited 30 homes in Lewis Subdivision and Knabb's Addition and talked to residents of 20 of these. I have since also talked with residents of other affected communities. What I learned, some of which is bulleted below, is my basis for asking the honorable members of City Council to renegotiate its agreement with FPL's siting plan because the current plan does not meet major tenets required for *fair treatment* and *meaningful involvement* of citizens:

- Not all residents or property owners in areas near FPL's high voltage corridor received FPL's notices about their 230 kilovolt expansion plans. In most instances, notices went to property owners—not necessarily to occupants/residents. In addition, at least one property owner, Lena Austin, received no notices from FPL. This is important because as a microbiologist, Dr. Austin understands the implications of a 230kV transmission line and would have participated in hearings about placing such lines near residential areas;
- I encountered no residents who knew of public hearings held for FPL's proposed high voltage lines. Only three households I encountered knew of the potential issues associated with high voltage lines. FPL's letters to property owners did not mention any risks or use the term “high voltage” which was part of the problem of getting people to attend hearings;
- Notices about hearings were apparently placed in the Baker County Press; however, I encountered no residents who said they had a subscription to the Press. I encountered only two households who said they read The Press regularly. Reasons for not subscribing to or reading The Press varied; however, the people who needed to attend hearing most would not see hearing notices placed in The Press. In addition, size and location of notices matter. Notices in the legal section are often overlooked compared to notices in the body of the paper. Still, because many people assume City Council meetings to be “other people's business” or assume that their views will not be valued, any notice aiming to win their attendance would have to be very specific in its wording;
- Community Experience/Monitoring: Of the 20 households with whom I spoke, 17 households noted having at least one member with an ailment that some researchers associate with environmental pollutants--memory disruption, respiratory disorders, attention disorders, cancer, and more; asthma seemed rampant. Several of these issues have affected

my family and friendship circle in ways that will continue to drive my commitment to this issue and to environmental justice in general for all;

- Regulation: Although some regulatory documents advise that high voltage lines should be at least 300 feet from the closest residence, I saw situations in which existing high voltage lines are closer than 50 feet to residences. I learned that my own home is one such home; that proximity may explain some of the sensations that I and others have experienced at my property over the years—raised hairs on limbs, feeling of slight pressure in the forehead/temples, and nosebleeds among them.

Although some states and industries claim to have established “safe” standards for radiation exposure, there is no biological evidence that those standards are indeed safe, especially in the long term. What will the evidence be in 10-20 years? Who can say? But who among us, by a show of hands, wants to be a participant in a game of “Let’s See What Will Happen to My Health and Environment If I Am Exposed to X Level of Radiation for X Number of Years”? Are we making people pay for services that may be putting them at risk? When we can avoid placing people at risk, we should take the high road and do so.

In the effort to allow voices from the affected community to be heard, I filed a motion to intervene in what I saw as a too-quick march toward approval of a high voltage plan not fully studied. With great regret, I had to bow out of intervening because Florida’s expedited time line for making decisions for utility company proposals gave little time for me to adequately prepare for a strong hearing. FPL filed a joint stipulation to dismiss my motion to intervene. The joint stipulation implied that other parties supported a quest to move quickly to the approval stage without resident input—even if “late.” But sometimes we have a second chance to do the right thing. The DEP’s 30-day appeals period is that second chance.

As individuals who have chosen often thankless lives of public service, I believe that you, more than most people, support the principle that no residents should be put in conditions that imperil their prospects for living their best lives and making their best contributions to the world. I urge you to use the DEP appeals period to renegotiate with FPL about the placement of their high voltage lines. Ensure that they are taking the safest path for all citizens rather than the easiest path: Require (1) that FPL not place its 230 kilovolt line within one-half mile of any Baker County residence or work place and (2) that FPL reposition any existing high voltage lines that are now within one-half mile of any residence or business. Certainly require them to move those that are closer than 300 feet to residences or workplaces. The financial cost of doing this right thing is comparatively little. Continuing the current path has extremely high costs in terms of peace of mind, public trust, and the asset that anyone who has been without it knows is the most valuable asset of all—good health.

I sincerely thank you, Councilpersons, for your time and attention, and hopefully, for your constructive action on this matter of protecting Baker County citizens and our environment. Please do not hesitate to call me at (215) 848-1280 if I can be of help in your efforts or if you need to speak with me during the meeting or after. Thank you.

Sonja Peterson-Lewis