Gas pipeline developers suing hundreds of landowners

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Developers of a proposed natural gas pipeline are suing hundreds of landowners in two states to gain rights of way granted by federal regulations.

Mountain Valley Pipeline lawyers filed federal court complaints in Charleston, West Virginia and Roanoke, Virginia to obtain easements through eminent domain rights, *The Charleston Gazette-Mail* reported Thursday.

The pipeline would extend south for 195 miles in north-central West Virginia through 11 counties to the Virginia state line, and nearly 110 miles (175 kilometers) through six counties in Virginia.

Pipeline lawyers said in both complaints that acquiring easements through condemnation is necessary as developers have been unable to negotiate agreements with the landowners. The filings said developers are entitled to 50-foot-wide rights of way for the pipeline in addition to using or building access roads and clearing trees as necessary.

The Virginia complaint lists more than 300 separate properties and the West Virginia one lists more than 140. The lawyers are seeking that both filings be handled quickly. West Virginia U.S. District Judge John T. Copenhaver Jr. was asked to schedule a hearing on or before Dec. 13 so developers can access properties by February and have the pipeline built and in operation by November or December of 2018.

Copenhaver expressed concern in a Wednesday order about the case's "vast number of defendants" and told developers to submit a report by Nov. 8 detailing how each landowner was served the lawsuit. Copenhaver also said a hearing would not be set until he was "assured" the service had been handled properly.

Also Wednesday, West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Austin Caperton decided to waive the state's individual certification for the pipeline under the federal Clean Water Act.

A divided Federal Energy Regulatory Commission last month approved federal eminent domain powers allowing developers to take private property for the pipeline.

Some landowners have opposed the pipeline plan in public forums. Among opponents was a West Virginia farmer who objected at a hearing in March in Clarksburg to moves to grant the project a state environmental permit, citing concerns that land would be taken in perpetuity and worries about the impact of fossil fuels on the climate.

Why pay raises are elusive even with U.S. unemployment so low

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

AP Photo/LM Otero

In this Oct. 13 photo, a potential job candidate takes a flyer from a human resources representative at a Target store in Dallas. The U.S. government issues the October jobs report, Friday.

WASHINGTON — With U.S. unemployment at a 17-year low and businesses complaining that they can't fill jobs, you might expect pay to be rising sharply as companies try to attract or keep workers.

It's not. The October jobs report showed that pay gains remain sluggish, and the explanations include weak worker productivity and a still-low proportion of adults with jobs. These are long-running trends that still bedevil the economy despite its steady improvement.

Employers added a solid 261,000 jobs last month, the government said Friday, in part because many businesses in Texas and Florida re-opened after having been forced to shut down in September when Hurricanes Harvey and Irma struck.

The unemployment rate reached 4.1 percent, the lowest level in nearly 17 years, from 4.2 percent in September. But the rate dropped for a less-than-encouraging reason: Many people stopped looking for work and so were no longer counted as unemployed.

Still, Friday's data showed that the hurricanes, for all their fury, hardly knocked the economy or the job market off course. Over the past three months, job growth has averaged 162,000— similar to the pace of hiring before the storms.

"Looking through the volatility from the hurricanes, the U.S. job market is in good shape," said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial.

Normally, with the unemployment rate ultra-low, businesses are forced to raise pay significantly to fill jobs or to retain existing employees. The last time the jobless rate was this low, in 2000, average hourly pay was surging at a 4 percent annual pace.

Then was then. In October, by contrast, wages crept up just 2.4 percent from a year earlier, the government said Friday. Though that's double the pace of five years ago, it's nearly a half-point less than the year-over-year rate in September.

It's particularly surprising given that some employers say they're desperate to hire. Mike Bolen, chief executive of McCarthy Building Companies in St. Louis, said he needs more electricians, carpenters, and laborers, as well as engineers, marketing and IT support. McCarthy has 16 offices and employs 4,000.

"We like to say there is no unemployment," Bolen said. "We have a shortage of everything, everywhere."

Four years ago, there would be about 30 potential employees in a union hall waiting for job postings, he said. Now, the halls are empty, and there are posted jobs with no takers.

Bolen is working with high schools and community colleges to train and recruit young people. He says he's raised pay in recent years and offers attractive wages: An entry-level laborer in Denver can start at $16 to $20 an hour and earn up to $30 after one year.

Homebuilders also say they would construct more homes — which could relieve a housing shortage that is depressing sales — if they could find more workers.

Still, the construction industry as a whole isn't raising pay much: Wages rose just 2.2 percent in October from a year earlier, Friday's report showed. That's even lower than the economy-wide average.

Reed Nyffeler, CEO of Signal 88 Security, is similarly frustrated. He says job applications have fallen 90 percent since the recession. The company, which provides security in 200 U.S. markets, needs security officers and professional staff.

"We have franchisees telling me every day they are turning down contracts because they can't find workers," Nyffeler said.

Signal 88 has raised starting pay for security officers from $9.25 an hour to $11.25 in the past two years. But other low-wage employers have also lifted pay, Nyffeler said, thereby creating new competition for Signal.

Many potential applicants can't pass drug tests, Nyffeler says, while others can live off government benefits.

His ability to raise pay, Nyffeler says, is limited because his clients are reluctant to pay more for his company's services. Signal 88 bills at $17 an hour, on average. The company tries to raise prices each year when it renews contracts, but many of its clients then threaten to seek alternatives.

Other companies appear in similar circumstances: Price increases throughout the economy are weak. Inflation rose just 2.2 percent in September from a year ago and would have been lower without a spike in gas prices.

One way out of the conundrum would be to raise worker efficiency. When workers become more productive — when their output per hour rises — companies can afford to pay more without raising prices.

Yet productivity growth has been weak since the recession ended in 2009. It grew just 1.2 percent a year, on average, in the past decade. That's less than half the growth rate before the recession. One reason productivity has been so sluggish is that companies haven't invested much in machinery, technology and other equipment that could boost workers' output.

BRIEFLY

Baker Boyer hires new marketing director

WALLA WALLA — Baker Boyer recently hired Jim Wilson as assistant vice president, marketing director.

Wilson joins the banking team with more than 30 years of experience in marketing and business development. His experience includes multiple marketing roles at Microsoft, several years as a marketing consultant and nearly a decade as an executive in the nonprofit sector, including United Way of King County.

Wilson

As marketing director, Wilson will work toward developing relationships in the communities Baker Boyer serves. He will implement marketing strategies to help create and strengthen relationships with current and potential clients.

"Jim's unique qualities and experience in marketing combined with his deep belief in supporting communities make him a great fit for Baker Boyer and our mission of growing local legacies," said Mark Kajita, Baker Boyer president and CEO.

Established in 1869, Baker Boyer has a branch in Milton-Freewater as well as locations in Washington. For more information, visit www.bakerboyer.com.

Chamber luncheon featured dam tour

HEPPNER — A tour of the gallery and the top of the Willow Creek Dam is included during the upcoming Heppner Chamber of Commerce luncheon.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will provide information during the Thursday, Nov. 16 event. People are invited to enjoy a box lunch (cost $10) at 11:50 a.m. at the chamber office prior to heading out for the 12:10 p.m. tour.

Those planning to attend need to register by Friday, Nov. 10 to ensure there is enough food and for Corps of Engineers safety arrangements. Participants need to wear sturdy shoes, a jacket and dress expecting to get a little muddy and damp.

For more information or to RSVP, contact 541-676-5536 or heppnerchamber@centurytel.net.

Workshop focuses on fair housing laws

HERMISTON — A workshop for property owners, property managers and Realtors provides an introduction and overview of fair housing laws.

The session is Wednesday, Nov. 15 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Hermiston Conference Center, 415 S. Highway 395, Hermiston. Sponsored by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon and Greater Eastern Oregon Development Corporation, there is no registration fee.

For more information, contact Karen Kendall at karen.kendall@geodc.net or 541-276-6745.