Richard Shingles testimony (MVP)

My name is Richard Shingles. I'm a professor of Political Science. Anita is a colleague of mine. We’re a tag team today. My area of specialty is the policies and politics of race and ethnicities. I'm going to discuss that as it applies to the issue of environmental injustice and talk a little bit about the politics and how that works.

To refer the map, this is the Mountain Valley pipeline from here up in northern West Virginia to southern West Virginia where it starts going this way, going directly south over numerous mountains. Many of you know that particular area when it gets to this point right here. It crosses from West Virginia over Peters Mountain into Giles county. I'm a resident of Giles County. Then it runs northeast until it gets to the Roanoke/Franklin area. This entire area is mountains, ridges and valleys. The area from about here to about here - it's all heavily karst. My county Giles county has 80% karst. It's a very difficult geological hazard. The residents of this entire area, with primarily an exception of Roanoke city, about here, and of college town of Blacksburg, Virginia - is overwhelmingly white and poor. These are the some of the poorest counties in the entire United States. Many of you know that. It pretty much fits the image Americans have of Appalachia. I want to talk a little bit about that.

There are important differences, very important differences, between Newport and Union Hill because of the racial composition, because of the oppressive history of white supremacy and privilege and the particularly brutal assault of Dominion on the historic Freedmen community in Buckingham. But there are some similarities that I want to talk about. Those similarities and how you manipulate race and ethnicity in the corporate world and for purposes of exploitation.

Unlike residents in the transient metro areas of our country, natives of these rural communities have similar attachments to the land which have been referred to today, typically because they've been there for many generations. They have a strong sense of community. They identify with the landscape. It's an important part of their value system. When we conducted a survey similar to the one that was done in Union Hill, it was door-to-door. We wanted to contact people that were within 1/4 mile of the pipeline. There were 130 homes we identified just in the Greater Newport historic area that were within 1/4 mile - that's the blast zone of the pipeline. We interviewed 96 individuals in those residences. We asked them in that questionnaire whether the land was special for them, and if they would they tell us why. This was an open-ended question. We didn't tell them how to respond. They overwhelmingly said it was special. The two most common reasons volunteered were: number 1, that the property had been in their families for multiple generations, and number 2: their love of the land. I think that's something that all these rural communities have, including Union Hill and my village of Newport, which is bisected by the pipeline.

The residents of Union Hill and Newport have another similarity and that is why they are been targeted for interstate gas pipelines, where you plan to build pipelines. The reason is the focus of this hearing, and that is that they are acceptable sacrifice zones for building pipelines, not only to the builders but to the population. That's important. That pertains to the politics of it. This is the core of the environmental justice concern which deals with when the burden of development is disproportionately put on poor and minority communities. Environmental injustice is endemic and it's well documented. It often exploits racial and ethnic tensions. Typically it’s part of a calculated strategy to route infrastructure projects through paths of least political resistance. An effective tactic is to frame the potential opponents of a structure like the pipeline as inconsequential, to the extent that the opposition of these projects can be defined as having no value: not like us, maybe even a threat to us. Those so stereotyped are left isolated and have little political support. These negative cultural stereotypes are well known. We know the kind of stereotypes that have been used to stereotype these individuals. We know stereotypes are dumb, lazy, immoral, irredeemable. In fact the same stereotypes are used for all these particular groups. That's particularly for permanent minorities - racial minorities - in our country. The similar stereotypes have been applied to rural white populations. The mountain people we know as hillbillies, rednecks and crackers. That's what Anita just referred to. These Appalachian communities are not nearly as defamed as the oppressed rural black communities but in the words of scholar Matt Wray they are perceived as “not quite white.” They've been perceived as second-class citizens all throughout the history of the United States. And as such, like the people in Union Hill, they are acceptable paths of least resistance. And that's the politics of siting pipelines. Thank you.