Groups ask Baker for safety changes at Pilgrim

PLYMOUTH — Watchdog groups on both sides of the Cape Cod Canal are calling on Gov. Charlie Baker to use his authority to protect the state’s residents from dangers related to the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station.

In a letter sent to the governor Wednesday, the groups compared the condition of the 42-year-old Plymouth reactor to that of the state’s glitch-ridden commuter rail system.

“The MBTA is not the only failing entity in this state,” plant opponents wrote. “Pilgrim is more than twice as old as the Red Line cars.”

William Maurer, a Falmouth resident and member of the Cape Downwinders, said he saw plenty of similarities between the floundering rail system and Pilgrim.

“I think that fact might strike a chord with the governor,” Maurer said. “The plant is another part of our infrastructure that’s old, unreliable and dangerous.”

Pilgrim Watch, Jones River Watershed Association, Pilgrim Coalition and the Cape Downwinders made three requests of Baker:

• To use his position to convince Entergy, the owner-operator of Pilgrim, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to shut down the reactor whenever there is the threat of a severe storm.

• To improve Pilgrim’s radiological emergency plan for evacuation and sheltering in place.

• To support pending bills filed by Cape legislators that would assess the plant owner a fee for onsite nuclear waste, expand the emergency planning zone, and increase radiological monitoring.

The letter, which also requests a meeting with the governor, is accompanied by more than 100 pages of documentation related to past problems at the plant and the reasons for those problems. Copies of the package were sent to Secretary of Energy and Environmental affairs Matthew Beaton, top officials at the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, area legislators, and the Plymouth Board of Selectmen.

Mary Lampert, a Duxbury resident and director of Pilgrim Watch, called the letter, “the beginning of the conversation” with the governor.

Lampert is optimistic Baker will agree to a meeting.

“This area of the state voted overwhelmingly for Charlie Baker,” Lampert said. “That showed we had confidence he would listen to and respect our concerns.”

Lampert noted the nuclear power plant is of great concern to the entire southeast region. “Therefore it is only reasonable to expect that he will meet with groups working on Pilgrim issues to better understand our concerns and develop policies to better protect public safety and economic interests of the commonwealth,” she said.

Pine duBois, executive director of the Jones River Watershed Association, said some anti-Pilgrim groups had sent a welcome letter to Baker in December.

Following a forced reactor shutdown in January during a storm and a letter from federal regulators saying the plant had not performed satisfactorily during a recent inspection, “We thought a more robust letter was in order,” duBois said.

“We want him to understand he has the authority to protect the state’s citizens. We, who have been working on this for a long time, believe there are significant issues he can address.”

A spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said the agency would not back a plan calling for a reactor shutdown whenever severe weather is predicted.

“The NRC does not see a blanket requirement as having a basis in either safety or necessity,” Neil Sheehan wrote in an email. “Rather, we expect plant operators and managers to assess each storm separately and make a determination based on whether continuing with operations could challenge plant safety.”

Entergy’s spokeswoman Lauren Burn said operators already take precautionary steps when storms are predicted. She cited the Feb. 14 storm when operators decided to shut down the reactor before snow began to fly.

Burn added Entergy does not believe the emergency zone around the plant requires expansion.

“Years of analysis went into the initial selection of a 10-mile zone, and additional years of study by the NRC have determined that it is the appropriate size to ensure public safety,” Burn wrote in an email. “State and federal agencies are responsible for developing the evacuation plans, and Pilgrim is working with them to ensure we have the best possible plans.”

Regarding the letter’s final request to support pending bills related to the plant, Burn said Entergy will “take a close look and consider their merits.”
"Pilgrim has a proven track record of safely producing clean, affordable electricity, as well as providing significant economic benefits for the region" Burm wrote.

A spokesman for the governor’s office confirmed Wednesday that the letter had been received.

"The administration through MEMA and the EEA have been in close and constant contact with Pilgrim and especially prior to, during and after recent severe weather events," William Pitman wrote in an email to the Times. "Safety is a priority for the administration and the governor will closely review any legislation that comes to his desk with that goal in mind."

— Follow Christine Legere on Twitter: @chrislegereCCT.