



Alma preferred route for power line crossing (01/20/2010)

*By Sarah Elmquist*

Plans for a proposed 700-mile 15-story electric transmission line that would cross the Mississippi in Southern Minnesota likely won't cut through Winona, after permits were filed with the state Tuesday, January 19, identifying Alma, Wis., as the preferred crossing.

CapX2020, an 11-company electric consortium which includes Xcel Energy, has been planning the transmission upgrade since 2004, which would stretch from Brookings, S.D., to Rochester. From there it was proposed to cross the river at one of three locations, including Alma, Winona or La Crosse. While the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) will have the final say in the route, the preferred route identified by the utility companies is usually the route that is ultimately chosen.

The proposed route crossing at Alma would take the power lines from north of Pine Island east, then cross the river just south of Kellogg, Minn. While previously proposed routes through Winona and La Crosse drew many objections, the more rural Alma area proposed crossing garnered much less controversy.

Both the proposed river crossing routes and the project itself have drawn criticism from local groups, some worried the 15-story towers would interrupt wildlife along the river and ruin views, others objecting to the project as unnecessary.

Several citizen groups have objected to the plans, claiming that the 15-story towers aren't needed by rate payers in Minnesota who would pay more, and would ultimately provide coal power from South Dakota to urban areas like Chicago. The Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF) has challenged a MPUC permit which ruled the project necessary due to increased demand for electricity.

Specifically, the group says that the previous Administrative Law Judge Report recommending approval of the project assumed that regional peak energy demands would grow until 2020. The group says that new evidence shows that Xcel Energy's peak demand declined nearly 12 percent from 2006 through 2008, adding that reasonable forecasts would show peak demand below the lowest threshold needed to justify the new transmission lines.

CapX2020 officials have begun meeting with landowners through open houses and other events. After the final route is approved by the MPUC, right-of-ways will have to be purchased from landowners, which could mean eminent domain.

The nearly \$2 billion project, if approved, is expected to begin in 2012 or 2013. The MPUC has the final say in how the project would be paid for.

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