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Power line project gathering opposition (06/10/2009)

By Sarah Elmquist

Opponents of a \$2 billion power line project that would cut through Southeastern Minnesota and Wisconsin met Monday in Wilson Township, gearing up to appeal a Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) certificate issued for the project.

Wilson Town Hall was packed with landowners concerned about how the project might affect their properties -- from land values to health concerns to whether Minnesota rate payers will even benefit from the new lines. Opponents claim that the lines will feed coal-generated power to metropolises like Chicago and Indianapolis, while Minnesota and Wisconsin communities will foot the bill.

Members of the Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF), alongside members of Bluff Land Environment Watch (BLEW), said that new information suggests that the transmission lines aren't needed. In April, the Minnesota PUC approved a Certificate of Need for the project -- a ruling which said there was enough evidence to show the project was needed. But just as the record was closed for that decision, new data has surfaced which suggests that demand is actually decreasing -- and will continue to decrease. CETF members asked that the record be reopened to include the new data. But it wasn't.

Now, the group plans to ask for a rehearing on the matter this week. If, and when, that's denied, an appeal on the decision can be made.

Opponents say that with an appeal, the new information can be presented. The Securities and Exchange Commission has shown that peak demand for energy dropped nearly 12 percent between 2006 and 2008, and that demand is predicted to drop further in 2009 due to a lagging economy.

CapX2020

The project's been coined CapX2020, and is composed of 11 electric companies including Xcel Energy. The proposed 700-mile transmission line project would run from Brookings, S.D. to La Crosse, Wis. A second phase announced several months ago would push the lines farther into Wisconsin to Madison.

The towers themselves would be at least 15 stories high and rival the Statue of Liberty. Some environmental advocates have objected to the lines because of the potential to disturb migrating and nesting birds along the Mississippi River valley.

Routes have not yet been finalized, but three river crossings have been put on the table: Winona, La Crosse, or Alma. If the Winona crossing is chosen, the line would cross at the East End Boat Harbor and follow the railroad tracks south. But at the foot of the bluffs along Highway 61 in Homer Township the route faces a problem crossing the bluffs and heading south. It could either cross just east of County Road 17, or it may travel further east and cross near County Road 15, then head south and cross County Road 17.

On Monday, the possible river crossing route in Alma was altered -- adding an option that would keep the lines out of portions of the river valley on the Wisconsin side. The option would send the lines from Alma straight east to Arcadia or Blair, Wis., then south to La Crosse.

'Save the river,
stop the line'

Jeremy Chipps, CETF member, spoke to Wilson Township residents Monday, and said that the dangers of the project -- from decreased property values to stunted tourism to the role (or lack of) the project would have on wind energy -- were coming "like a freight train."

The Upper Mississippi River Wildlife Refuge is the most visited refuge in the country, said Chipps, adding that it was important to protect the beauty of the driftless region and river.

Many local wind energy advocates also object to the lines because they say they'll haul coal-generated power thousands of miles with a central generation, antiquated system of transmission. The old way of harvesting power from centralized coal and nuclear sources and distributing it with huge transmission lines, they say, doesn't agree with the small, localized wind energy projects. The new lines could force wind energy into huge centralized wind farms that poorly mimic the old system of generation in one spot and distribution across thousands of miles.

And, said Joe Morse of BLEW, we'll be stuck with that old distribution system for many years to come.

"It will hold our children and our grandchildren back," said Chipps.

The real guarantee for where energy will come from that will travel the lines will be made through power purchase agreements much later in the game.

The money

Morse said that CapX2020 officials have estimated the cost of the project at \$2 billion, but since then, the cost of steel has doubled which will likely drive up that price tag.

“We pay, the utilities profit,” said Morse. The PUC will determine how the project gets funded -- but rate payers in Minnesota will bear at least some, if not most, of that cost.

Chipps said that there were similar projects, and similar arguments, across the country, and that little communities like ours “are getting beat up all over. It’s about companies and Wall Street making money.”

The alternative, said Morse, is new “Smart Grid” technology. It’s a system already implemented in Denver and other cities across the country in which energy consumers -- both families and businesses -- can actually monitor the way they use energy. They can see when energy costs the most and when peak demand drives up the price, then alter their energy consumption for the lowest bill. That saves on energy, and, on the need for new transmission lines.

“We don’t need to build this line,” said Morse. “It’s the wrong system and we need to stop it.”

Court action

CETF and several other groups are planning to appeal the Minnesota PUC certificate of need for the project, and hope that they can actually stop the project from being constructed. They also told visitors at the Wilson meeting that they should continue to attend informational meetings about the project, and also work with Wisconsin opponents to the line. The Wisconsin Public Services Commission has not yet ruled on permits necessary for the Wisconsin portions of the project.

Those who’d like to find out more about CETF or contribute to its legal fund can visit www.cetf.us, or write to CETF, P.O. Box 601, Castle Rock, Minn., 55010; tax deductible contributions can be sent to Mississippi River Revival/CETF Fund, P.O. Box 315, Winona, Minn.

Upcoming meetings about the project include the following: Scoping/Environmental impact meetings June 16, 6-8 p.m., Plainview High School; June 17, 6-8 p.m., Wanamingo Minn. Community Center; June 18, 6-8 p.m. St. Charles Community Center; June 23, 6-8 p.m. La Crescent American Legion; June 24, 6-8 p.m., Centerville, Wisconsin Community Center (Highway 54/93); June 25, 6-8 p.m., Cochrane Fountain City High School.

An informational meeting scheduled by the city of Winona will also be held on June 29 at 6 p.m. in the City Council Chambers.