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Area folks not happy about CapX2020 project (07/01/2009)

*By Sarah Elmquist*

A 700-mile powerline project that could cross the river in Winona and require eminent domain in order to be constructed won't really feed power into Winona, spokespeople for the project confirmed Monday.

Winona's been chosen, along with Alma and La Crosse, Wis., as one of three potential river crossing points for the project, dubbed CapX2020 -- a consortium of electric companies including Xcel Energy. Because there is already a river crossing for existing powerlines near the East End Boat Harbor, and because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has opposed granting additional right-of-way to cross the river, the new towers must cross the river at an existing crossing.

Several citizen groups have opposed the project and appealed a Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) decision to grant a certificate of need for the \$2 billion project. Monday, business owners and residents who feared that the new lines may affect their properties asked questions about what the project might mean for them, some adding that the utilities group had never even contacted them.

If the Winona route is chosen, the new 345kV lines would cross Highway 43 north of I-90, then cross County Road 17 and run northeast of the Bridges golf club, then straight north. At the bluffs before Homer Road, the route would skirt a bluff to its west, cross Homer Road and Highway 61 and follow the river northwest along the edge of the city. It would narrowly pass several industrial businesses as it ran parallel to the Levee before crossing at the East End Boat Harbor, including Peerless Chain and Modern Transport.

Because buildings and tall trees cannot be located within a 150-foot right-of-way for the towers, some property owners feared that their homes or businesses might be affected, even need to be moved. On maps displayed by project representatives, it seemed unclear whether the route along the river would provide wide enough for the 150-foot easements, or, whether existing buildings would have to be moved or torn down for the project.

CapX2020 representatives said that the project hasn't begun finding very specific routes for the lines yet, and that they'd be working with property owners to find the best options that would affect properties the least. Valuations for lands taken for the utility easement, they said, would be determined by using an appraisal process in which compensation is based on the impact the easement has to a particular property.

Some who attended the meeting asked whether the existing 80-foot easement for the current powerline crossing the river in Winona would be enough for the new lines to go up. Grant Stevenson, project manager for Xcel Energy, said that there was a trade-off that could be made in areas where the right-of-way wasn't wide enough - - more frequent towers.

The towers will typically be 105-175 feet tall - rivaling the Statue of Liberty, with about 750-1,100 feet between towers.

Some who attended the meeting worried about potential health effects of the transmission lines, while others doubted the need for the project altogether. "What's the advantage to me, personally?" asked one woman,

adding, “I don’t want to pay for it.”

The population in Winona County, they said, isn’t even really growing much.

CapX2020 representatives showed a map labeled “Benefit Area,” highlighting Winona, Rochester and La Crosse with a large brown blob. But they admitted the new lines aren’t really for Winona electric consumers. “There will be no direct electric connection to Winona,” said Stevenson.

Southeastern Minnesota is within a nine-county planning region, he told the crowd, in which there had been some population decline. But, he said, use has increased.

That argument contradicts opponents to the project, who have brought forth information from the Securities and Exchange Commission which shows that peak demand for energy has decreased by nearly 12 percent since 2006.

Questions about what percentage of wind energy the new lines might carry were not answered, although CapX2020 officials have claimed the project will be needed for the Minnesota renewable energy goal of 25 percent renewable by 2025.

But Stevenson admitted Monday that the project wasn’t all about wind. He said that it “doesn’t directly impact wind [energy development],” but that it “lays part of the foundation” needed to develop wind energy.

Where it goes

Opponents to the project have long claimed that the lines will really be used to carry coal-generated power to metropolises like Chicago and beyond.

Stevenson said that CapX2020 “wasn’t involved” with additional projects that would carry the lines eastward, but said that they will go east. He referenced a project being studied called The Green Power Express, which would add about 3,000 miles of “extra high voltage” 765kV lines stretching from North and South Dakota, through Minnesota to Iowa and Wisconsin, then on to Illinois and eastward.

Stevenson also said that if all goes as planned, the project will begin construction in 2011 and would “supply the region” until 2025, when a new transmission line would be needed.

Learn more

CapX2020 is currently being studied through a Federal Environmental Impact Statement needed to proceed with the project. The opportunity to provide comments about environmental and routing concerns is open until July 25 and can be directed to: Stephanie Strength, Environmental Protection Specialist, USDA, Rural Development, Utilities Programs, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Room 2244, Stop 1571, Washington, DC 20250-1571, or e-mail [stephanie.strength@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:stephanie.strength@wdc.usda.gov).

Several citizens groups have also challenged the PUC’s certificate of need for the project, asking that the record be reopened to reflect data not studied previously that shows declining peak energy demands. Keep reading the Winona Post for the full story.