



CapX2020 towers could pass through Winona (04/15/2009)

By Sarah Elmquist

On Wednesday, state officials will review plans for a 700-mile 15-story transmission line that could cross the Mississippi in Winona, with a decision on a major permit expected Thursday.

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 Rochester the line is proposed to cross the Mississippi at one of three locations: La Crosse, Winona or Alma, Wis. Plans are currently before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) for a Certificate of Need permit, which requires the PUC to rule the project necessary based on energy demand forecasts and a lack of alternatives to address that forecasted demand.

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. Still others oppose the plans because of the river crossing that they say would pose a hazard to threatened migratory birds which use the Mississippi Valley during migration.

On Wednesday April 15, members of several initiatives against the 345kV high voltage lines, including the Citizens Energy Task Force on CapX2020 (CETF), were expected to ask the PUC to reopen the record and accept new evidence they say shows the transmission lines aren't needed.

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.

If the PUC denies the request to reopen the record, the Certificate of Need would likely be approved. From there, the power companies would have to apply for routing permits and then work with property owners on purchasing right-of-ways for the 15-story towers, which could stretch 75 feet wide in either direction. The nearly \$2 billion project, if approved, is expected to begin in 2012 or 2013.

The proposed 345 kV lines may also help utility companies meet new renewable energy standards that require 25 percent in renewable by 2025. "[The new lines] probably mean renewable energy," said project spokesperson Tim Carlsgaard, "that probably means wind energy."

Opponents to the project say that there is no guarantee that the lines would carry wind; rather, they fear the lines would actually haul coal-generated power to more urban areas on the dime of energy rate-payers in Minnesota. The PUC has the final say in how the project would be paid for.

If the project is approved and 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.

Read the weekend edition of the Winona Post for an update on the proposed transmission line.

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