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## Mammoth high-voltage line alarms residents

As landowners worry about the \$1.7 billion CapX2020 project, officials say expanding the power grid is necessary.

By [JENNIFER BJORHUS](#), Star Tribune

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Like most people, Eric Johnson never really thought much about transmission lines.

But now that a high-voltage power line threatens to dwarf his Dakota County home, he thinks about it every day.

The inch-thick aluminum and steel cable draped on steel poles some 10 stories high has become a nightly topic for Johnson and his wife, Kristen, who worry about health issues and raising their three young children so close to the 345-kilovolt line. They fear it will force them to abandon their home -- and their life savings.

"This is all we have," said Eric, a grounds maintenance contractor.

The Johnsons are among thousands of Minnesotans in the path of CapX2020, one of the most ambitious expansions of Minnesota's transmission grid ever. The \$1.7 billion project will add 700 miles of overhead wires capable of moving 4,500 megawatts of electricity, expanding the grid by about 30 percent. Work is to begin later this year.

State energy officials and utility regulators say the expansion is necessary. An increasingly wired population and growth in areas such as St. Cloud and Rochester have created bottlenecks they fear will only worsen as the economy recovers.

Even so, opposition from those in the path of CapX2020 has grown. While the knitting together of the nation's Balkanized grid may be an inevitability, CapX2020 offers a sneak preview of the painful ground-level realities. Wires will cross people's yards and farmland. They make noise and affect property values. The higher voltages needed to move power long distances raise safety questions for those living near them.

"Would you feel comfortable living under lines like that?" asked Percy Scherbenske, a Thoroughbred horse breeder in Hampton who's worried that the CapX2020 line that could run past his barn would put him out of business.

How much success they'll have fighting the utilities remains uncertain. State lawmakers are working on legislation to hold utilities to a higher standard -- the same as governments -- when it comes to taking private land for projects.

Alfred Marcus, a management professor at the University of Minnesota, said Minnesota, and the nation, needs a new way to help utilities and landowners negotiate impasses or stalemates could stifle economic progress.

"There's an institutional void around this issue," Marcus said. "Nobody has the incentive to say come, on, let's sit down."

### Remembering Bolt Weevils

Many Minnesotans remember the last era of big transmission investments. The late 1970s were marked by violent protests over the line from the lignite coal fields of North Dakota to the Twin Cities.

Activists smeared themselves with manure. An anonymous group, calling themselves the "Bolt Weevils," reportedly shot out nearly 10,000 insulators and toppled 14 towers. A young professor at Carleton College, Paul Wellstone, co-authored a book about it: "Powerline: The First Battle of America's Energy War."

Utilities now go through a more rigorous approval process with regulators. CapX2020 has tried to route the lines down existing roads and field lines instead of cutting directly across them. Still, battles continue.

From his office high in the former World Trade Center in downtown St. Paul, Bob Johnson spends his days handling investment funds in commercial real estate. He's an unlikely power line activist, but he and his wife, Patricia, have backed a costly campaign -- they won't say how much, but estimates are close to six figures -- against the CapX project. One leg of CapX would run past their hilltop home along a country road called 220th Street East outside Hampton.

The 240-mile line from Brookings, S.D., to Hampton won't jeopardize their views or land, the Johnsons say, but they think 220th Street East is a lousy choice because it affects a disproportionate number of people and businesses, including one of the country's largest Cambodian Buddhist temples and Scherbenkse, the horse breeder.

They've proposed an alternate route about a mile north that would mostly cross farmland. The farmers there don't want the power line, either.

To bolster his case, Johnson flew in experts to testify at a December hearing; among them was David Carpenter, director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University of Albany in New York. Carpenter testified that there's a link between exposure to magnetic fields above 4 milligauss and increased risk of cancer, particularly childhood leukemia.

Someone standing 100 feet away from a 345-kilovolt line would be exposed to a calculated average of 3.4 to 12.5 milligauss, depending on the exact spot and whether one or two circuits are operating.

Utilities brought in their own experts, arguing that the health risks from power lines are hypothetical. The average Sonicare toothbrush generates magnetic fields of some 240 milligauss, they argue, while acknowledging people don't live with a toothbrush in their mouths.

## Dropping demand

The Brookings line isn't the only leg of the CapX under fire. Dropping energy demand has a trio of citizen groups, including a group of south metro landowners called the Citizens Energy Task Force, asking the state Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to re-examine the need for the line from Hampton to La Crosse, Wis., which would cross the Mississippi through a national wildlife refuge.

When the utilities pitched CapX to regulators in 2005, they projected energy demand in Minnesota and neighboring states would grow about 2.49 percent a year through 2020, or by about 6,300 megawatts total, according to the group's appeal filed in October with the State Court of Appeals.

Since the recession, demand has been dropping, and CapX utilities have cut individual forecasts. Great River Energy is now planning for a 1.28 percent annual growth rate through 2020. The CapX group as a whole, however, hasn't revised its official demand forecast.

The Citizens Energy Task Force thinks they should.

"The utilities are asking for a very big, very expensive network that's more disruptive than it needs to be," said the group's attorney, Paula Maccabee.

The utilities argue that electricity demand will inevitably rebound. Both the PUC and an administrative law judge have agreed that new lines are needed, they said.

A hearing on the issue was held at the court of appeals last month. A decision is pending.

## A fair price

How much landowners will be compensated remains unclear. Under eminent domain, utilities can lawfully seize and condemn private land for their projects -- at a fair price -- but they try to settle with landowners first, getting them to sign an easement agreement and take a check.

Most landowners sign such agreements fairly quickly, something Xcel Energy and Great River Energy point to as evidence that they deal fairly with landowners.

Tracking the private offers is difficult. Lawyers who've worked with property owners say utilities frequently squeeze landowners, lowballing them on initial offers or not including the impact the power line has on their property value.

"It's a David and Goliath battle, only it's David without a rock and a sling," said Bryan Voight, one of eight homeowners in Dakota County that battled Great River Energy over a new power line a few years ago and won. The utility initially offered him \$250 to \$500 for running a line across his front yard. The group eventually settled for amounts far higher.

Craig Poorker, a land rights manager with Great River Energy and CapX, said that the utility does not include the impact on property values in easement offers. He called the Voight situation an "anomaly."

Trying to ensure landowners are treated fairly as CapX looms, Minnesota lawmakers are seeking to tighten eminent domain laws as they apply to utilities. Among other things, they want utilities to pay

attorneys fees for landowners who were lowballed. Voight said he paid one-third of his award to his attorney.

In Hampton, Eric and Kristen Johnson say they just want to be treated fairly, too. A decision on the basic route of the Brookings power line is expected by summer. The line could end up 300 to 500 feet away from their house, Poorker said. The Johnsons said the jog away from their house might even be worse, because then the utilities might not have to compensate them at all.

"It's still too close," said Kristen Johnson. "We're talking 150-foot towers that make lots of noise."

For now, they wait.

"We're just kind of sitting here in limbo," said Kristen. "It's scary."

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