

Wis. ponders power lines (12/28/2011)
By Sarah Squires

Power line towers that rival the height of the Statue of Liberty are being constructed across Minnesota, expected to cross the Mississippi River in Alma, Wis. But where they go from there is still up in the air, with permitting from Wisconsin not yet secure and two routes still on the table: one that would follow existing lines along the Great River Road south to La Crosse, another that would head inland to Arcadia and then run south.

CapX2020 is a joint initiative of 11 transmission-owning utilities in Minnesota and the surrounding region, adding 345kV lines from Brookings, South Dakota across Minnesota to La Crosse, Wis. The lines will eventually connect to the Badger Coulee line to Madison and then to other lines that head to Chicago and farther east. Project advocates say the new power lines are needed to meet future energy demands in the area, and will include renewable energy sources to help meet Minnesota's renewable energy standard, requiring 25 percent of electricity to come from renewable sources by 2025.

But a growing group of concerned residents has been organizing in opposition to the project. Some worry that the new power lines -- 150 feet tall --- will impact the scenic Great River Road, mar the bluffs on the Wisconsin side and harm the sensitive environments along the Mississippi River. Others don't want to give up their land or homes to eminent domain for the project and worry about declining property values, and still others believe the lines aren't needed, and are really an attempt to bring coal power from the Dakotas to the eastern part of the country, while asking rate payers in Minnesota and Wisconsin to foot the bill.

At a meeting earlier this month in Trempealeau, about 30 people gathered who had concerns about the transmission lines. Members of the Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF), who helped host the meeting, urged attendees to go out and ask their county and town boards to pass resolutions in opposition to the new power lines. A petition against the project had netted about 800 signatures, and since, a handful of town boards in Wisconsin have adopted resolutions in opposition of the towers, as well as the La Crosse County Board and the Holmen School Board.

CapX2020 has done some environmental review itself of the proposed routes as part of the Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity (CPCN) permit application process. Routing manager Tom Hilstrom said that there are some issues with the route that would run along the Mississippi River in Wisconsin to connect to La Crosse. "There [are] some concerns with the most direct route that runs closer to the river," he said. "Concerns about aesthetic impacts along the Great river Road." Additionally, wetlands on the south end along the Black River would face environmental impacts, he said.

Many who oppose the power line project believe that there is not a justified need for the power in the region. The Minnesota portions of the power line project faced legal challenges, after several groups asked the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission to reopen the record for new information they said shows that the lines aren't really needed by rate payers in Minnesota, fearing the lines would simply supply coal-generated power to urban areas like Madison and

Chicago. Opponents of the project say that local renewable energy projects like small-scale wind operations need smaller, local upgrades to the grid, not the large “super highway” of 345kV lines proposed for CapX2020. Such a system, they say, forces wind energy development to mimic centralized power generation plants like coal and nuclear, and will mean large scale wind farms coupled with coal power.

The appeal in Minnesota was rejected, but news from Wisconsin has contested energy demand projections from CapX2020 officials. While CapX2020 estimates show that electricity demand will increase by 1.7 percent, the Wisconsin Public Services Commission (PSC)’s Environmental Impact Statement showed the need at less than half that projection, with an increase of .78 percent, calling the need for the lines “questionable.”

“A lot of people are realizing that this is going to affect the entire community,” said CETF member Joe Morse during the recent Trempealeau meeting, citing concerns about decreases in property values and tax bases along the power line route. “The need just isn’t there.”

The PSC includes three commissioners appointed by the governor, expected to make a decision about the project need and project route by June, 2012.