

High-voltage lines generate organized opposition

Associated Press 1:26 PM CDT, September 14, 2008

ST. PAUL, Minn.

 A major high-voltage power line proposal is generating organized opposition.

The CapX 2020 project would bring more electricity -- including wind-generated power -- from remote parts of Minnesota closer to the Twin Cities. It calls for three 345-kilovolt lines that could cost between \$1.4 billion and \$1.7 billion and a fourth, smaller line farther north to be added later.

Eleven utilities, led by Minneapolis-based Xcel Energy and Great River Energy of Maple Grove, are backing the project. They say the lines are necessary to meet projected regional growth in power demand, including in Rochester and St. Cloud.

Foes, however, say the project will cost upward of \$2 billion and be an expensive boondoggle for customers.

At news conference this past week, Rep. Ken Tschumper, DFL-La Crescent, joined a with southeast Minnesota group, the Citizens Energy Task Force, to say the utilities are overestimating the power needs of the region and can't prove that the new lines are needed.

The power lines would run between Fargo, N.D., and the St. Cloud area; between Brookings, S.D., and the southeast edge of the Twin Cities; and from the southern edge of Dakota County through Rochester to La Crosse, Wis.

The opponents say they support wind energy, but they fear the high-voltage lines would be used to bring in power generated from coal-fired plants in South Dakota near the state line, where a plant called Big Stone II is planned for near Milbank, S.D. Backers of Big Stone II are seeking approval from the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission to build their own power lines from South Dakota into Minnesota. The PUC has delayed a decision pending more information on the costs associated with the plant.

If those lines are rejected, said Paula Maccabee, attorney for the Citizens Energy Task Force, the fear is that Big Stone II would piggyback on the CapX 2020 lines instead.

"What does Minnesota get? We get the pollution," she said.

Xcel Energy and its project partners have conceded that the timing of their initial demand forecasts may have been off, but they believe the region's energy needs will grow and that new transmission lines need to be built now, said Jim Alders, Xcel's director of regulatory administration.

Renewable energy advocates want the PUC to ensure the utilities would use the lines to transmit wind power, said Beth Soholt, executive director of Wind on the Wires, a nonprofit advocacy group.

But Alders said federal law requires transmission lines to accept electricity from all sources, so the utilities can't reserve a portion of the lines exclusively for wind power.

Minnesota utilities must generate 25 percent of their electricity from clean, renewable resources like wind by 2025. The rules are stricter for Xcel Energy, the state's largest power company, which must get 30 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020.

Minnesota's environmental community is split into two camps over CapX 2020.

The North America Water Office and the Institute for Local Self-Reliance oppose the project, saying better technology will soon make large transmission projects outmoded. However, Wind on the Wires and a group including Fresh Energy, the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy and the Izaak Walton League, support CapX 2020.

Hearings have been held around the state over the past several months, and the public comment period ends Sept. 26. This fall, an administrative law judge will review all evidence submitted and report to the PUC on whether the project is needed.

On the Net:

CapX 2020: <http://www.capx2020.com>

Citizens Energy Task Force: <http://cetf.us>

No CapX 2020: <http://nocapx2020.info>

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