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CapX approval for \$1.7 billion utilities project sparks debate

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) has granted a “certificate of need” for three new 345-kilovolt power lines, immediately sparking a debate between supporters who say the lines are needed, and environmentalists who envision a state dominated by smaller, decentralized power sources.

“The planning and regulatory review for high-voltage lines is detailed, extensive and comprehensive,” said Laura McCarten, a co-leader of CapX2020, a group of 11 utilities who are funding the construction of the transmission lines, in a news release issued after the commission’s vote late Thursday.

“The (MPUC’s) decision affirms the need for new infrastructure that will serve Minnesota customers with affordable, reliable electricity for years to come,” she said. The \$1.7 billion project, utilities say, will shore up rural transmission needs and prepare for additional megawatts provided by wind farms.

Ask the Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF) and you get quite a different answer.

“I have to question whether the (MPUC) is a watchdog for the people protecting ratepayers, landowners and the environment, or a lapdog giving the utilities whatever they want,” said Jeremy Chipps, a member of CETF who lives near the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge, a major migratory route for birds. One of the 345-kilovolt lines granted a certificate of need by the MPUC will run through the refuge.

Chipps spoke of a possible legal challenge to the CapX2020 lines, an effort spearheaded by Minneapolis-based Xcel Energy Inc. and Great River Energy, but he noted that the utilities’ legal resources easily can outspend CETF.

Chipps expressed particular frustration that MPUC members would not allow letters of concern about the transmission line – one from a U.S. Department of Interior official and another from Minnesota State Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes – to be put into the record.

Don Hultman, a refuge manager for the Department of Interior’s Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, said, “I strongly support delaying a decision on the certificate of need. The public needs more opportunity and time to learn and understand the true needs and the social and resource tradeoffs of this project” in a letter to David C. Boyd, chair of the MPUC.

“... it has become obvious that there is a tremendous amount of confusion and concern with the general public on this project, especially within communities bordering the refuge,” Hultman wrote.

In a letter sent to all MPUC commissioners, Erickson Ropes asked that more accurate energy-demand forecasts from utilities be submitted before the transmission lines are built.

“... When smaller lines and local (energy) sources could meet regional energy needs, these options should be pursued to protect southeastern Minnesota’s wildlife and ecosystem,” she wrote.

The power lines issue also has stirred concern among a number of power line activists concerned about the effects of electro-magnetic fields, or EMFs.

“Smart transmission development is much cheaper than building more big dumb power lines needed by central-station wind farms and coal plants, and enables much more new electrical generation capacity to come online quickly,” said George Crocker, a long-time power line watchdog who now runs the North American Water Office in Lake Elmo, in a CETF news release.

Next for the CapX2020 utilities is receiving a permit for the lines and routing them, which environmentalists fear will displace many homes as utilities decide the best routes for transmission lines.

Besides Xcel and Great River, other utilities in the 4-year-old CapX2020 effort are: Central Minnesota Municipal Power Agency, Blue Earth; Dairyland Power Cooperative, La Crosse, Wis.; Minnesota Power, Duluth; Minnkota Power Cooperative, Grand Forks, N.D.; Missouri River Energy Services, Sioux Falls, S.D.; Otter Tail Power Co., Fergus Falls; Rochester Public Utilities, Rochester; Southern Minnesota Municipal Power Agency, Rochester; and WPPI Energy, Sun Prairie, Wis.

Minnesota regulators OK major power line

Line enters state at La Crosse

Elizabeth Dunbar

Associated Press

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ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Plans for three 345-kilovolt power lines touching Wisconsin and three other states will move forward after Minnesota regulators on Thursday ruled there's a need for additional transmission capacity in the region.

The transmission lines are the main component of the CapX2020 project, an initiative led by Xcel Energy and Great River Energy to upgrade and expand the electric transmission grid.

The decision by the state Public Utilities Commission is the first major step in a regulatory process that's expected to take at least another 18 months. The lines must also get Minnesota permits for their routes and face regulatory hurdles in North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

"The commission decided unequivocally that these three projects are absolutely needed and are definitely in the interest of the state and our customers," said Laura McCarten, co-executive director of the CapX2020 project. "We think that's just huge."

The lines will run from near Brookings, S.D., to Hampton southeast of the Twin Cities; from Hampton to Rochester to La Crosse; and from Fargo, N.D., to Monticello.

A broad coalition of landowners, environmentalists and renewable energy advocates had pressured the PUC to deny a certificate of need. Those who live near the proposed lines brought up concerns about property values and health risks -- including that the high-voltage lines could disrupt internal heart defibrillators and pacemakers.

Environmentalists raised concerns about one of the lines possibly going through the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge between Minnesota and Wisconsin. And they said the lines don't fit with the state's renewable energy and conservation goals.

The PUC did adopt wording that left some renewable energy advocates more supportive of the line between eastern South Dakota and near the Twin Cities. The so-called Brookings line will be required to carry 700 megawatts of renewable energy, mostly from wind power.

Commissioner J. Dennis O'Brien proposed the decision that the PUC adopted Thursday, saying the state Legislature has set clear renewable energy goals. That includes a law requiring utilities to generate 25 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2025.

"This ties the utilities more closely to wind energy, and that's what the Legislature has asked us to do," O'Brien said. "We need transmission capacity for that development and haven't updated the grid for a long time."

Commissioners also said the nearly \$2 billion project could help create jobs, although construction isn't expected to begin right away. The Brookings line is the furthest along in the process.

Members of the Citizens Energy Task Force, who argued that the eleven utilities supporting the project have overestimated the future demand for energy, said they will keep fighting as the regulatory process continues.

Jeremy Chipps, a La Crescent resident and task force member, said the discussion about how to meet energy demands should focus more on producing local renewable energy that can be distributed locally. "If we embark on this, it will take a lot longer to get to that paradigm shift," he said.

And while wind energy advocates applauded the conditions placed on the Brookings line, advocacy group Wind on the Wires said the PUC missed an opportunity to guarantee that wind energy will be carried on the other two lines.

"There are plenty of renewable energy projects waiting to interconnect," said Beth Soholt, the group's executive director.