

ATC's Badger-Coulee line is unnecessary

By Matt Johnson Vernon County Broadcaster July 27, 2011

The American Transmission Company (ATC) can't prove a 345 kilovolt line is needed in the near future between Madison and La Crosse.

It can commission studies, it can hold meetings, it can provide suggested corridors... ATC can do a lot of things, but it can't empirically prove that adding a 345 kV line, as is proposed in its Badger-Coulee Transmission Line, is necessary.

ATC, a transmission-only utility, operates \$2.9 billion worth of utility lines stretching nearly 10,000 miles in Wisconsin, Upper Michigan, Minnesota and Illinois. Its website explains the \$425 million Badger-Coulee line this way: "(the line) would address electric system reliability issues locally and in the Midwest, provide economic savings and support renewable energy policy."

Yet when the Wisconsin Public Service Commission examines this project and ultimately decides its fate, it will have to decide if the line is necessary. The answer to that question is "no." The national demand for electricity is growing at a slower and slower rate. Addressing future electrical needs is the gaping hole in ATC's arguments regarding the Badger-Coulee line. It's the 800-pound gorilla in the corner that is being ignored.

"There are multiple benefit indicators that make the Badger-Coulee Transmission Line Project a plus for Wisconsin residents and the Midwest," John Procario, ATC president, chairman and chief executive officer, said when the plan was unveiled. "It's an exciting new project because it demonstrates multiple benefits. Badger-Coulee enhances electric system reliability; it provides direct energy cost savings to electricity users and it supports the public's desire for the greater use of renewable energy resources."

The truth is, existing power lines are already reliable. They are well maintained and have served the public well, most notably during last week's heat wave that saw exceptionally-high electrical usage. Viroqua's local power provider, Xcel Energy, hit record days, Monday, July 18, and, Wednesday, July 20.

How did the system perform?

"We really had very minor situations due to the heat," Liz Wolf Green of Xcel Energy said. "Our main outages were due to storm damage. We're prepared to handle multiple days of peak load."

There's no ignoring that the theory of "transmission" is different than that of providing energy. ATC's plan involves moving electricity across vast distances. However, the existing system still transmits energy in a manner that allows it to function beyond

reasonable expectations at peak demand. The evidence is that the system is already reliable under existing maintenance programs being carried out by utilities.

As for providing energy cost savings to electricity users, that seems like an oxymoron. How can building a \$425 million electrical line that isn't necessary save anybody money?

ATC claims the Badger-Coulee Line will "provide utilities with greater access to the wholesale electricity market with potential savings that can be passed on to electric consumers."

Recognize that these benefits have little to do with Western Wisconsin electrical consumers. Wisconsin power companies produce more power per day than they consume. Again, the existing infrastructure is more than capable of handling the transmission of energy now and well into the future.

As for the Badger-Coulee line providing greater use of renewable energy sources, that isn't an issue here. The Badger-Coulee line is going to send electricity from one region to another. Is this energy going to be green? No. Make no mistake, the Badger-Coulee line is going to carry a large load of electricity generated by coal-powered plants. To suggest that a transmission line has a purpose that supports renewable energy is unreasonable. It's a transmission line. Simply by creating it you are fighting against the entire theory surrounding "renewable" energy. Renewable energy should be used locally.

One thing that the Badger-Coulee line is about is money. It's part of a greater expansion to the Midwest transmission line grid, estimated to cost close to \$40 billion before it's all complete. The CapX2020 line north of La Crosse and into Minnesota is one of these projects. The PSC recently received an 180-day extension in considering the CapX2020 project.

The need for the Badger-Coulee line isn't local. It supports giving utilities easier ways to profit on trading energy and balancing ledger sheets that show how much renewable energy a utility has purchased. But again, convenience doesn't necessitate building the Badger-Coulee line.

ATC is "privately" owned, but municipalities and utilities are its owners. They split its profit. ATC is not a demon, it serves a necessary function. And for serving that function, ATC is well compensated. Yet, just because ATC has a plan to create a transmission line, does not mean it should be created. The PSC will have to weigh the factors ATC presents against other evidence and opinions when it makes its decision about allowing the project to move forward.

One would think that such a project would need approval before it had a location. That, sadly, is not the case.

What some people consider to be the most important issue regarding the Badger-Coulee line is its location. The truth is the entire debate over the location of the line is a red

herring. It gets people to stop thinking about the important question, “Why do we need this transmission line?” and instead has them saying, “Not in my back yard!”

ATC can not prove that the Badger-Coulee line is needed. That’s the issue. ATC has to balance its arguments of reliability, savings and renewal against a litany of negative consequences surrounding the construction of a 150-mile long line of 170-foot high towers that require a right-of-way as wide as half-a-football field. The expense of such an endeavor, coupled with the fact that it will take people’s property, forever change the landscape and pose any number of health risks, certainly make the Badger-Coulee line unacceptable. But those arguments should not be needed. The main point is, there should be no Badger-Coulee line because one is not needed.

ATC’s Badger-Coulee line doesn’t serve the public, it serves utilities. And it doesn’t serve the utilities in a way that serves the public. The Badger-Coulee line is not necessary. The PSC should not approve the project.

The Badger-Coulee line application to the PSC is reference No. 137855 and has a docket or utility number of 137-CE-160. For more information check out ATC’s website at www.atllc.com; or check out websites of opposing groups online at www.soulofthekickapoo.org; www.cetf.us; <http://fieldpost.org/Stark> Energy/Resources.htm

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