

Landowners upset about CapX2020 prospects

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Jim Gilmer owns 295 acres of land in northwest Houston County and southwest Winona County, where he spends time playing with his grandchildren and hopes to allow his son to build a home someday. Those plans could be in jeopardy if a proposed high voltage power line weaves its way through southeastern Minnesota toward La Crosse.

Gilmer, along with several of his neighbors in Sather Valley, north of Houston, owns property along a possible route from Hampton, Minn., to La Crosse for the CapX2020 project. But he didn't find out about the project or that it could cut through his land until a little more than a month ago. Planning for the project, which has options as to where it will run and ultimately cross the Mississippi River, began in 2007.

It wasn't until a neighbor called that Gilmer heard of plans for a power line to run through his farm.

"I'm going, 'You've got to be kidding me. I haven't gotten a word from anybody,'" Gilmer said.

On Aug. 5, Gilmer and other neighbors met with Minnesota Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes at his farm to convey their disappointment about the lack of information and their displeasure about the possibility of the line disrupting their homes.

"I think it's inexcusable," Gilmer said of the lack of notification. "How can I own a piece of property and have a project of this scope coming right through it? I have not gotten one mailing, not even a generic letter some of the neighbors got."

CapX2020 spokesman Tim Carlsgaard said the project sent about 22,000 letters to people along the proposed line, names the project received from affected counties. He said he has heard from at least 25 residents who said they didn't receive letters, and it's possible some were missed. Those names were sent to the project's direct mailing company, which sends out the mailings.

"It's the counties that provide us with landowner data," Carlsgaard said. "Some counties are much better than others as far as the information they have and how updated it is."

The proposed line would run along the Houston-Winona County border, splitting Gilmer's recreational area in half the main reason he moved to the valley in half.

"The environmental impact of this project is immense," he said, "and people are just now learning how big a monster it is."

Gilmer moved to the valley in 2005 intending to sell 80 acres of land to his son to build a house on. Ironically, he wants to build an off-the-grid, energy-independent home.

“All my life, I’ve looked for a place like this to come to,” he said. “I planned to have grandchildren living up the driveway and I’m willing to fight as hard as it takes, not only from going through here, but also anybody else’s backyard.”

Like Gilmer, Bill Farrell, another Sather Valley resident whose Winona County land is affected by the proposed line, didn’t find out about the project until recently. The revelation to him was purely accidental.

“I ran into a friend of mine in town who actually had a map of the proposed line,” Farrell said. “He said, ‘I think this thing goes through your place.’ Well yeah, it does.”

As it stands now, the line would encroach near his house and other outbuildings.

Since learning about the project, Gilmer has written his state senators and representatives and has spoken with environmental groups, but for the most part, he has been frustrated. He has gotten no personal response from U.S. Senators Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken or Congressman Tim Walz. He’s thankful Erickson Ropes has taken up the cause.

“We’re right in the middle of God’s country here, and I’m hearing from rural land owners that the CapX2020 project is not good for southeast Minnesota,” Erickson Ropes said. “It’s a great big, gigantic, expensive energy project that is going to roll through all these blufflands, taking land away from farmers and rural property owners, and we get no benefit.”

“As taxpayers, we’re going to be footing the bill and as ratepayers, we’re going to be footing the bill,” she added.

There has been plenty of conversation about the CapX2020 project at the Capitol, Erickson Ropes said. She has heard the argument for the project and isn’t convinced the need is there.

“We get calls every day from people ... questioning the need for this project, and I cannot even think of one call I’ve gotten where people are telling me this is terrific,” she said.

But Carlsgaard stressed the process is far from over and exact routes are still subject to state scrutiny. This fall, CapX2020 plans to submit a route permit to the state. Once that happens, it starts a 15-month process to determine the route, over which the state has the final say. CapX2020 has to submit at least two route options for the Hampton-to-La Crosse route. At this point, there are three possible river crossing locations: La Crosse, Winona and Alma, Wis.

And the state doesn’t have to accept any of the choices. It could devise a hybrid of CapX2020’s proposals or take suggestions from local governmental bodies, which it will accept during the examination period.

“With one of our other projects, they agreed to look at 47 additional alternatives,” Carlsgaard said. “This is a long process (and) there are lots of opportunities for public involvement.”

If or once a final route is selected, CapX2020 is prepared to offer landowners a one-time easement payment, the amount of which varies for each property and is dependent on land value, zoning and other factors.

But for both Gilmer and Farrell, no amount of money could make up for the 15-story-high towers planted on their land.

“They couldn’t give me enough to leave,” Gilmer said. “How do you place a value on the fact you’ll no longer have grandkids coming down the driveway? How do you place a price tag on that? You can’t.”

“Are they going to compensate me for what it’s going to devalue my whole 260 acres at? No,” Farrell added.

Gilmer knows the fight is uphill. He said he feels somewhat helpless taking on a large conglomerate of utilities. He has contacted the Citizens Energy Task Force, a La Crescent-based group opposed to the line, to see what it’s doing in regard to the project.

“You think about the resources at the disposal of the utility companies. They’re going to have the best law firm in the world sponsoring their fight,” he said.

Erickson Ropes said she isn’t sure if it’s a winnable fight, but she likened the scenario to David and Goliath.

“Here you have the Davids (southeast Minnesota farmers) who have found out, very late in the process, that Goliath is going to come rolling across their bluffland and take property away from them,” she said. “(But) who knows if we’ll be able to sling the right rock, just to get CapX right in the forehead.”

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