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Is it Alma? Or will it follow Hwy 52/I-90 (08/30/2009)

By Sarah Elmquist



A consortium of electric companies proposing to erect 700 miles of high voltage transmission lines across the state and through Southeastern Minnesota announced Thursday that crossing the Mississippi River at Alma, Wisconsin, will be the preferred route.

That news came at a contentious hearing on the proposed \$2 billion transmission line project hosted by Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes in Houston, Minnesota. Spokespeople for the project debated a representative from the Citizens Energy Task Force (CEFT), a group that's opposed to the lines, while Ropes moderated. Worried landowners from across Southeastern Minnesota also voiced objections to both the proposed routes and the project itself. About 25 people were at the meeting.

Called CapX2020, the new, 150-foot tall lines would eventually connect to high voltage lines that are proposed to cross Wisconsin to Madison and then head south to Chicago in future stages. The 700 miles of lines proposed through Minnesota would be paid for by Minnesota rate payers with a formula determined by the Public Utilities Commission.

And on Thursday, CapX2020 spokesperson Tim Carlsgaard said that because the state's Public Utilities Commission ultimately decides the route for such transmission lines, Alma might not be the river crossing chosen. Other river crossings proposed include Winona and La Crescent, Minn.

Just as CapX2020 officials announced the preferred Alma crossing, however, at least one local lawmaker has said that project planners should rethink the route entirely. State Representative Steve Draskowski issued a statement supporting a new route that would disturb less private land across Central and Southeastern Minnesota — an idea that's been proposed by landowners along the way but never made CapX2020's list.

Draskowski said that the route should leave the Twin Cities and follow Highway 52 south, then extend east along I-90. "The state already owns this right of way, and there would be no reason to destroy farmland to make the project work," said Draskowski.

Draskowski met with officials from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT), which had reportedly been less than willing to give up some existing highway right of way for the new lines. But, said Draskowski, that route is still on the table, and Mn/DOT is creating a committee to analyze the proposed routes.

One landowner whose valley would be interrupted by the high voltage towers agreed with Draskowski, wondering why the project didn't follow I-90 east. "Now, you're going to string wires across these valleys and put colored balls up there — it's going to look like a circus." Why not, he said, follow the highway instead of "crawling

through these hills and valleys?”

Project opponents: We don't need the lines

Activist George Crocker, founder of the North American Water Agency, told those at Thursday's meeting that regardless of where the route or river crossing ends up, the project should be rejected by citizens. Huge transmission lines don't support small, clean, local renewable energy, he said. Rather, the huge transmission lines are a component of old systems of power generation fed by large, centralized power sources like coal. For new and renewable energy to be added to this sort of large scale line, said Crocker, wind energy will be forced into large wind farms that mimic the old system of centralized coal power.

Crocker further noted that energy use in the Midwest has dropped nearly 12 percent since 2006, and has continued to drop. The utility companies, he said, used old projections from 2004 that expected energy demand to increase when state permits acknowledging the need for the project were awarded.

Carlsgaard said that while area energy use did drop another percent last quarter, historically after a mild weather or a recession, demand picks up again. The use will grow, he said, and this project is needed to keep the lights on.

Carlsgaard also said that because wind doesn't always blow, there needs to be a backup power source to help fill the gaps as wind energy is developed. He acknowledged Big Stone II, a proposed coal plant in South Dakota, and several natural gas plants, in the works that may work with the new high voltage lines to provide that "backup" to wind energy.

Crocker said that local, clean, renewable energy is the wave of the future. And, small wind turbine projects like the one proposed by Winona County can hook up to the existing lines and provide local power without spending \$2 billion on high voltage lines to send large quantities of power over hundreds of miles. The proposed system, he said, will make it more difficult for small, local projects to connect to the grid, and will favor large scale energy sources. "We've made the commitments to renewable energies, we're the ones paying for it, and they're getting the profits," he said. "This isn't about [scientific] numbers. It's about who is getting the action."

Crocker asked that those in the audience shouldn't forget about it, even if it leaves their backyards and heads toward Alma. "Most of us don't know enough about this, we're uneducated about the basics," he said, adding that if the public were educated about the issues, vested interests, corporate culture and money wouldn't be making all of the decisions. "We don't know about [these kinds of infrastructure] decisions until they whack us in the heads and we wake up. Please, don't go back to sleep."

To learn more about CapX2020 visit www.capx2020.com.

To learn more about CETF and opponents to the line, visit <http://cetf.us/>.

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