

# FINANCE AND COMMERCE

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## High-voltage power line plan draws criticism

by [Betsy Sundquist](#) Staff Writer

### Utilities accused of ramming through a proposal for new transmission lines across Minnesota

Critics of a proposal to build new high-voltage electrical transmission lines through the state say citizens are not being given enough information about the proposal – and fear that the new lines would pose a health risk to those living nearby.

“I want to make sure the citizens of Minnesota ... are aware of potential problems of this nearly \$2 billion proposed project,” Rep. Ken Tschumper, DFL-La Crescent, said at a Capitol news conference Tuesday. “If you’re a utility rate payer, you’ll be funding this project.”

The CapX 2020 project, proposed by a consortium of utilities, would run power lines from Bemidji to Grand Rapids, from Fargo, N.D., through Alexandria to Monticello, and from Brookings, S.D., to Rochester to La Crosse, Wis. Tschumper’s district is in the Rochester-La Crosse section of the proposal.

“A project this large that would crisscross the state in both directions, with massive 15-story-high, super-charged power lines, should be under public scrutiny, yet few people in my area were aware of it,” said Jeremy Chipps, a La Crescent resident who has spearheaded a campaign against the proposal. “That’s why I began informing others about it.”

Chipps, who said before Tuesday's press conference that he acted as "something of a Paul Revere" in telling his neighbors about the project, began a petition drive and collected 150 signatures from others in the La Crescent area who are opposed to the plan.

"We think it's very highly questionable and that it's being railroaded through," said Chipps, who says the proposed line would be located "300 yards off my port bow."

"I'm not a 'not in my back yard' type person, but we have strong concerns about this."

Planners have said that consortium's proposal was designed to meet an expected increase in demand for electricity in the area and have estimated that use will grow from 4,000 to 6,000 megawatts by 2020, more than the current system can handle. One megawatt is enough to power about 800 average homes.

-2-

If approved, the lines would be constructed from 2012 through 2015, according to the CapX 2020 website, [capx2020.com](http://capx2020.com).

The CapX 2020 consortium – which is made up of investor-owned utilities, electric cooperatives and municipal utilities – includes Xcel Energy and Dairyland Power Cooperative of La Crosse, which provides electricity to the area of concern to Tschumper and Chipps.

"The Minnesota utilities have worked hard to develop a plan to meet the growing demand for power," Jim Alders, director of regulatory administration for Xcel Energy, said in a statement after Tuesday's press conference. He noted that consumption of electricity in Minnesota has doubled since 1980.

However, those opposed to the CapX 2020 proposal insist that the need is not as urgent as planners have said it is.

Bev Topp, a DFL candidate for the state House from District 36B who lives near the proposed Brookings line, co-founded the Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF) in January in response to the CapX 2020 proposal. She spoke Tuesday against the plan, saying citizens should be encouraged to have a greater voice in the future of energy initiatives and the decision-making process.

"The utilities have stacked the deck and claimed that the power lines are needed when they are not, and have vehemently opposed any conditions which would require that these high-voltage lines must be used for wind energy," Paula Maccabee, an attorney for CETF, said Tuesday. "This is a bad deal for landowners, ratepayers and developers of community-based renewable energy in Minnesota."

Opponents also object to the electromagnetic fields that the new power lines would generate, pointing to studies that link an increase in childhood leukemia to such emissions. However, the consortium says on its website that "decades of scientific and medical research" have found no cause-and-effect evidence of threats to human health from electromagnetic fields.

Those opposed to the plan also criticize the utilities for claiming that the project should be exempt from Minnesota's "renewable energy preference" in building energy facilities, and for not making a firm commitment to use the new lines for wind power.

In addition, critics say, the utilities have refused “repeated requests” to provide details on how much utility customers would be asked to ante up for the new lines. And they say the La Crosse line – which would cross the Mississippi River – would violate a Minnesota rule that prohibits crossing protected wildlife refuge land.

In a list of frequently asked questions on the CapX 2020 website, the consortium notes that the project is expected to cost \$1.4 billion to \$1.7 billion. Because transmission costs usually make up about 7 percent of an electric customer’s bill, Xcel Energy customers could expect an increase of less than \$2 a month as a result of the project, the website says.

As part of the approval process for the project, the consortium must ask for approval of a certificate of need, which will be determined by Administrative Law Judge Beverly J. Heydinger. The judge will review the consortium’s plan along with public comments, and will make an approval or denial recommendation to the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission.

Tschumper and other critics of the proposal urged concerned residents to submit comments – including “personal stories with details and concerns – to Heydinger before the Sept. 26 deadline.

“I’m encouraging citizens who are skeptical of the project, like I am, to send a letter to the administrative law judge before the deadline,” Tschumper said.

Alders, too, suggested that the public make their concerns known.

“We encourage all interested parties to participate in the ongoing regulatory process in Minnesota and to provide their comments to the administrative law judge by the Sept. 26 deadline,” he said.

Comments can be sent via e-mail to [capx.oah@state.mn.us](mailto:capx.oah@state.mn.us). Additional information on submitting public comments is available at the CETF website, [www.cetf.us](http://www.cetf.us).