

Jeremy Chipps: Act now to affect CapX2020 decision

By Jeremy Chipps / La Crescent

Three massive high-voltage power lines are proposed by Xcel, Dairyland and nine other utilities. One extends from Minneapolis to La Crosse. Recently, a Minnesota administrative law judge recommended CapX2020 proceed.

Now the future of the Coulee Region's river shores, bluffs and residential property is before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission. Hearings are scheduled April 15, with a decision expected April 16, starting at 9:30 a.m. daily at the MPUC building, Large Hearing Room, third floor, 121 Seventh Place E., St. Paul. If a certificate of need is granted, next comes the long and painful "routing" sessions where landowners here must confront the issue of power line invasion. Eminent domain laws allow utilities to condemn private property.

The facts:

We don't need it — energy use is declining. Citizens Energy Task Force recently petitioned the Commission to reopen the record due to newly discovered evidence in the recessionary economy that electric demand for some utilities has significantly declined, rather than growing as predicted. Bottom line: There is no regional energy need for CapX2020.

It's not for wind — it's more dirty coal. The judge isn't requiring wind or community-based energy development (www.c-bed.com). This means dirty coal, nuclear or any energy source can travel on these wires, holding us in a costly and environmentally dangerous old-world energy system. A similar illustration appeared in "Home-Grown Power," by Ian Bowles, secretary of energy affairs in Massachusetts (March 6 N.Y. Times), warning against current moves by Congress to rush into costly new transmission systems that would carry power from remote areas to population centers. "Energy companies and elected officials see it as an economic development opportunity for their region and they claim to meet the president's energy goals. But there are better and cheaper ways to get cleaner power flowing to big cities." Local renewable energy, like solar and wind, dispersed efficiently with smart technology is the key.

Who pays, who benefits? You pay for the multi-billion-dollar lines with rate increases. Energy companies profit by exporting power to points east. In contrast, Chicago has already identified 9,000 megawatts of potential wind capacity closer to home. East coast energy experts also question the need for costly long-distance lines ("America's Wind Web," Christian Science Monitor, Feb. 18, 2009).

Mississippi River/National Wildlife Refuge impact. Crossing the protected Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge would negatively impact wildlife and ecosystems. The lines cross the river at one of three sites (Alma, Winona or La Crescent). One path follows the river on the Wisconsin side, entering Holmen and La Crosse. Another traverses through La Crescent and into La Crosse, disrupting sensitive marshland at Lang Drive. There is no alternative route that would not harm the refuge.

Tourism, property values. Tourism and property values would be diminished by the massive 15-story-high steel giants.

Health risks. High-voltage lines create electromagnetic field exposure associated with increases in childhood leukemia. Coal power also promotes dangerous mercury levels — increasing at an alarming rate in our environment.

Long distance lines are inefficient and pose national security risks. Likewise, sending Midwest-generated wind energy long distances causes significant line losses.

New power lines vs. “smart grid” technology. “Smart transmission” can come online immediately and be gradually used as needed, according to George Crocker, energy expert from The North American Water Office. “We can accommodate community-based energy development which would create thousands of good jobs, enough wealth for healthy communities, and enough tax revenue to educate the children and care for our elders.” (www.ilsr.org and www.nawo.org)

Environmental and corporate stewardship. Everyone has responsibility for protecting environmental resources. Yet CapX doesn’t fully consider impacts on clean air, water, land and other natural resources. Corporate profitability is important and ensures jobs, but as we evolve into a new energy paradigm, balance of these will be crucial. We can do this smartly and cost effectively, but not by using old school “centralized” energy production with long-distance delivery. Energy companies should be partners with America’s communities — not just energy supply zones, private investors and Wall Street.

Take action now. Concerned about increased health risks, environmental impacts, massive 200-foot-towers, increased rates, decreased home values and tourism? Call and e-mail your federal/state legislators before April 15, urging them to contact MPUC and reopen the Certificate of Need record. Hold the utilities accountable. Attend the April 15 hearings. Conservation with local, renewable and sustainable energy should be our future — using local jobs. Become a CETF member (it’s free): www.cetf.us.

Jeremy Chipps is a member of Citizens Energy Task Force.