

Power line needs serious look

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Wisconsin should ask tough questions about the need and price tag for a major, high-voltage power line stretching from the Madison area to La Crosse.

But Wisconsin also should keep an open mind as public input is sought.

Our state relies on a huge amount of imported energy. The new line would boost reliability and provide access to more of the wholesale electricity market. That could save Wisconsin ratepayers money.



The 150-mile, 345-kilovolt line also could give Wisconsin greater access to renewable wind energy generated in Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Dane County isn't getting any smaller. Our population will soon top a half million people. Though using energy more efficiently must remain a high priority, so must economic growth and jobs.

The American Transmission Co. just gained permission for a similar high-voltage line around Madison along the Beltline to boost reliability and capacity. The company plans to begin construction of the local line next year. The Rockdale-West Middleton line succeeded in part because of an open process of meetings and information that made the case for action.

ATC is now pledging to similarly engage the public as it seeks what's being called the Badger Coulee Transmission Line project. The path of the power line is unclear. It could follow the interstate or veer more southwest toward Reedsburg, Richland Center and Viroqua.

Putting up new power lines always comes with controversy when property owners don't want the tall poles passing by — or through — their land. Yet the potential good to the state's economy sometimes takes precedent.

That's why a careful and fair assessment of the proposal is so important.

ATC places the cost of the line at up to \$425 million. That's a lot of expense for ratepayers to absorb.

Charlie Higley, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board, which advocates for consumers, is wisely taking a wait and see approach. So is the Sierra Club in Madison, which wants to assess the project's ability to promote clean energy.

Wisconsin needs sufficient electricity and more clean energy to power its future. A thoughtful review and lots of public input to ATC's latest pitch are needed to make the right decision.