

Public input pays off in power plan

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In a couple of years Wisconsin likely will know whether a high-voltage power line will be built between the La Crosse and Madison areas.

When the decision occurs, Wisconsin residents will have had ample opportunity not only to understand the pros and cons but also to influence the decision and the choice of route.



For that, we can thank a transparent process of public input that was underscored last month at eight public meetings around the affected area.

This is a model for how to make public decisions about the public interest.

It didn't always happen this way. Not that high-voltage power lines were ever dropped into backyards and across pristine countrysides overnight by black helicopters. But to many residents, that's nearly how it seemed.

In recent years, however, American Transmission Co., which operates the high-voltage power transmission system in Wisconsin, has adopted a more open approach than its predecessors.

ATC has discussed a potential power line across western Wisconsin for years. Two years ago the company settled on the La Crosse-Madison proposal, called the Badger Coulee Transmission Line Project.

The line offers advantages. Wisconsin is a net importer of power with only a handful of power lines carrying electricity into the state. That limits flexibility and efficiency, risks reliability problems and could lead to higher prices.

In addition, a westward line could bring more wind-generated electricity into Wisconsin to meet renewable energy standards. ATC also calculated that a more efficient high-voltage line would save \$140 million in lower-voltage upgrades.

However, the new line would cost \$425 million, adding about 75 cents to a \$100 monthly utility bill. And the line would be intrusive - at least to landowners along the path.

The plan deserves scrutiny, which was the purpose of the public meetings last month. Residents had a chance to raise doubts about the line's value, given that electricity demand is increasing slower than earlier projected. They also raised concerns about route choices, including whether the line would interfere with air traffic at the Baraboo-Wisconsin Dells airport.

ATC executives can now digest the input before making a proposal to the state Public Service Commission in another public process, predicted for 2013. If approved, the line could be in service in 2018.

Not everyone will be happy, no matter the verdict, but all will have had a say. Other industries that face regulatory decisions affecting the public interest would be smart to adopt similar processes for involving the public.