

Lancaster hearing highlights opposition to proposed transmission line

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LANCASTER, Wis. — More than 150 people turned out to the Grant County Fairgrounds on Tuesday afternoon during the first of six public hearings addressing a proposed high-voltage transmission line.

Nearly all who testified spoke against the Cardinal-Hickory Creek project, which involves the construction of a 345-kilovolt line from Dubuque County to Dane County, Wis.

They decried the cost, what they argued was a lack of need and the potentially damaging environmental impacts of the project.

“The proposed electrical line with 170-foot poles will dwarf mature 60- to 70-foot trees and dominate the visual landscape of the Driftless area,” said Dave Swanson, of rural Platteville. “The change in the landscape along the transmission lines will reduce my property value significantly.”

Cardinal-Hickory Creek is an undertaking of American Transmission Co., ITC Midwest and Dairyland Power Cooperative.

Two hearings on Tuesday in Lancaster were hosted by Wisconsin’s state utility regulatory agency, the Public Service Commission. The Tuesday night hearing drew about 50 people.

Before Sept. 30, the three-member PSC must decide by majority vote whether to approve the project.

The federal government and Iowa’s regulatory agencies also must sign off on Cardinal-Hickory Creek if the project is to move forward. Federal officials intend to release a report by October before issuing a final decision, while the Iowa Utilities Board will review the project in December.

The line and a new substation would to be financed by utility consumers within a 15-state region, including Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin.

According to PSC staff, the project’s cost, including capital, financing, operations and maintenance, is estimated at \$628 million, with ATC receiving an annual return on common equity of 10.8 percent and ITC of 11.3 percent.

The transmission companies have stated that Cardinal-Hickory Creek will improve the reliability of and reduce congestion on the power grid and meet customer demand for low-cost renewable energy.

The companies estimate that after deducting project costs, Cardinal-Hickory Creek will provide net economic benefits to customers of between \$23 million and \$350 million during its 40-year expected life.

“I think it’s a matter of making sure we have the transmission backbone in place to make sure that ... we can reliably deliver clean, renewable energy to this region,” said ITC spokesman Rod Pritchard.

According to Beth Soholt, executive director of Clean Grid Alliance, transmission projects like Cardinal-Hickory Creek are the only solution to meet consumer demand for renewable energy and open opportunities for renewable development.

The membership of the nonprofit organization, headquartered in St. Paul, Minn., includes utility-scale wind, solar and energy storage developers and manufacturers.

“Our members will be financially harmed if this line does not go through,” she said. “There are a number of existing projects operating that are getting their output limited by the grid operator because there is no transmission capacity available ... to say nothing of the new projects that are in the queue and are coming.”

Several opponents of Cardinal-Hickory Creek said the project relies upon an antiquated model of power generation and distribution that increases consumer costs.

“We could put that same amount of money, the same effort, into local power generation,” said Barbara Brown, who spoke on behalf of her father, who lives in Montfort.

Although 95% of the preferred route shares right-of-way with existing infrastructure, Susan Anderson, of Monroe, said the management techniques within existing landowner easements often are destructive to the environment.

“What the applicants seem to fail to comprehend is what our land means to the people of southwestern Wisconsin,” she said. “It is our livelihood.”

Of the 24 people who testified Tuesday afternoon, only Troy Brechler, a beef cattle farmer from rural Boscobel, was unsure of whether the line was needed rather than opposing the transmission project outright.

“We need affordable, reliable and plentiful electricity in southwest Wisconsin,” he said, later stating that he hopes Cardinal-Hickory Creek helps accomplish those goals.

“They are mentioning alternatives as being the answer,” Brechler said of the line’s opponents. “I don’t see that as being the reliable part. Maybe down the road.”

Four more hearings will be held this week in Madison and Dodgeville.

Participants are permitted only to share personal opinions, so their statements will not be treated as technical evidence when commissioners deliberate on the merits of Cardinal-Hickory Creek.

However, the project also is judged based upon land-use impacts, of which public testimony is an important part, said Howard Learner, executive director of the Chicago-based Environmental Law & Policy Center.