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Big lines bad for health and home, say experts

By Kevin Ma
Staff Writer

Overhead power lines have a measurable effect on human health and should be buried whenever possible, says a renowned health expert.

Roughly 3,500 Edmonton and area residents gathered at Rexall Place Tuesday for a rally on the Heartland Transmission Project, a proposed 500-kilovolt double-circuit power line meant to ferry power to upgraders in the Alberta Industrial Heartland. One of the four proposed routes for the line runs by St. Albert.

Survey results show Albertans want these power lines buried when they run by homes, schools or natural areas, said Bruce Johnson, president of Responsible Electricity Transmission for Albertans (the rally's organizer), and are willing to pay the cost to do so.

"We need to tell our elected officials that it's time they reflected our wishes," he said. "Let's get on with it and let's get it underground."

Overhead is health risk, says expert

Research strongly suggests that the electromagnetic (EM) fields from power lines have a noticeable effect on people's health, said speaker Magda Havas, a professor of environmental science at Trent University and authority on electromagnetic fields. The fields cause everything from headaches to higher rates of cancer.

Her research involves isolating people with medical problems from EM radiation to see what happens. "We're getting some dramatic responses to the tests we're doing," she said. Diabetics seem to need less medication, and multiple sclerosis patients have better muscle control. "People who can't walk normally are able to walk within a few weeks."

She criticized Health Canada (which says there is no conclusive link between power lines and human health) for having lax standards when it comes to EM exposure.

"What's now accepted internationally is that [the risk of] childhood leukaemia doubles between two and four milligauss," said Havas, referring to field strength. Canada's unofficial guidelines permit up to 833 milligauss. "We're orders of magnitude above [the level at] which we have health effects." Above ground power lines should not be placed near schools as a result.

Bad for property values

Power lines also have a definite impact on property values due to health concerns, said speaker Brian Gettel, a real estate analyst who has studied their effects. Lines did not seem to affect prices during the 1950s, he said, which was a time when little was known about their health effects. After a 1979 study linked power lines to cancer, the price of homes near lines started to drop.

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"Fear in the market translates into value losses," he said. Researchers might not agree that power lines harm health, but the fear that they might causes real effects in real estate.

Price effects depend on many factors, he said, the biggest being visibility. As the Heartland line would have very visible 60-metre towers, he had strong concerns that they would negatively influence property values.

Recent studies suggest a power line can knock 10 to 50 per cent off a home's value, Gettel said. "Do these [power lines] have the potential to create a negative impact? Absolutely. How much, I can't say for certain."

Underground review

The Heartland team is now studying the feasibility of burying the line, said Fred Ritter, speaking on behalf of the Alberta Electric System Operator. "We don't see any show-stoppers, but we haven't concluded all our work."

Japan has run a 40-kilometre stretch of 500-kilovolt line underground for 10 years without any major operational problems, said co-presenter Stephen Kane of AltaLink. The team still needed to test the line materials to see if they work in Alberta's winters. They expect to publish their study in January.

The Heartland team is expected to pick a route for the line sometime in January.

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