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RETA asks for review of Heartland project

by **GLENN COOK**

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First, Responsible Electrical Transmission for Albertans asked the provincial government to bury the power lines. Now, they're asking if they need to be built at all.

The group, which gained notoriety late last year in lobbying for portions of the proposed Heartland Transmission Project to be buried, sent a letter last week to Premier Ed Stelmach asking for a review of the whole project given scaled-back oilsands upgrader development in the Fort Saskatchewan area.

RETA vice-president technical John Kristensen said that, when the Alberta Electric System Operator (AESO) came out with their underground feasibility study earlier this year and said that the 6,000-megawatt capacity line would only be powered up to 900 megawatts until 2027, the group really began to question its need altogether.

"We thought, 'What is going on? Do they need this line or don't they?'" Kristensen said. "If they're not thinking that they'll even need it until 2027, and they might only juice it up to 2,000 megawatts in 2027, that's still only one-third of its total capacity of 6,000 megawatts."

"That's when the light went on with us, so to speak."

But Alberta Energy spokesperson Kristin Stolarz said that the AESO first made the determination that the Heartland lines were needed based on a 20-year projection, and that hasn't changed enough to warrant scrapping the project altogether.

"It's the same type of approach you'd expect out of any long-term planning.

Whether it's roads or hospitals or schools, there has to be a forward look, and that does mean, at some point, there's going to be something built," she said.

"When [the AESO] update their forecast and determine that the demand growth is still there, just a fraction smaller, we still say the projects are still needed," she added. "It doesn't change the need for any of the critical transmission infrastructure because it is such a small difference. We're looking at a situation where the oilsands development will still be there; it's just staged over a longer period of time."

The Heartland Transmission Project would transport electricity from the south end of Edmonton to the planned upgrader sites near Fort Saskatchewan. Initially, controversy arose over the possible route the overhead 500-kilovolt power lines would take, with some fearing they would pass too close to residential areas and cause adverse health effects on young children.

Thousands of residents from across the Capital Region turned out to a public meeting at Rexall Place in late November to voice their concerns. St. Albert city council had even threatened legal action if a route skirting the city limits was chosen.

In January, EPCOR and AltaLink announced that their preferred route would go east of Edmonton, through Strathcona County. They also announced that 20 of the 65 kilometres of lines would be placed underground, with the intention of bypassing heavily

populated areas. A secondary route was also proposed that would run east of Spruce Grove, coming within three kilometres of Morinville town boundaries.

Kristensen said that he has heard arguments that it would make sense to build the line now, when construction costs and inflation are lower, to have it ready for the future, but that only makes sense if more upgraders are built, and all signs point to them not going ahead.

"The data suggests that the companies that were going to build upgrading refineries in the Heartland, they've already made decisions to ship the raw bitumen down south through pipelines or the electricity they need to do that at the upgrading stage can be produced by themselves by way of co-generation," he said.

While the premier has yet to respond to RETA's letter, the group has gotten feedback from other interested stakeholders in the Heartland debate, most of it positive.

"A lot of people who wondered why, from the outset, RETA wasn't into the Bill 50 battle have called us and said, 'Finally you guys joined the Bill 50 battle; thank you very much,'" Kristensen said, referring to a controversial bill passed by the Alberta government in November that removed the requirement for public hearings on new electricity transmission lines.

To read the full RETA letter to the premier, check out their website at <http://www.reta.ca>.