

# Little support for power line in Amish country

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CASHTON, Wis. — Wisconsin's top utility regulator heard dozens of people explain why they don't want or need high-voltage power lines running through a community that is home to the state's largest Amish population and wind turbines that more than meet its energy demands.

Hundreds of people, nearly half of them Amish, packed the Cashton village hall Wednesday for the third of five public hearings on the Badger-Coulee project, a joint proposal of American Transmission Co. and Xcel Energy to build a 345-kilovolt line connecting the Madison area to a growing transmission network.

Most who spoke voiced similar concerns to those already on the record.

They complained of the line's impact on health, property values, economic development, quality of life and wildlife as well as the lack of need, arguing a no-wire solution would be more cost-effective and less detrimental.

ATC and Xcel say the line, which would tie in to another high-voltage project now being built between Hampton, Minn., and Holmen, would improve system reliability, deliver cheaper power for Wisconsin consumers and provide a pipeline for wind energy from Minnesota and Iowa to population centers to the east.

Opponents say the demand is not there, and the line would allow utilities to profit by trading energy while discouraging more cost-effective alternatives such as energy efficiency and solar power.

The cost — estimated at up to \$580 million — will be passed on to utility customers across the Midwest, with Wisconsin ratepayers picking up about 15 percent of the tab.

One of the two primary routes would cut from Interstate 90 south to Cashton, where it would turn east and follow the Monroe County line. The other goes north from Holmen to Black River Falls and follows the interstate to Dane County.

The PSC can approve, deny or modify the project and determine the final route. A decision is expected in April.

Wednesday's hearing, attended by PSC Chairman Phil Montgomery but neither of the other two commissioners, took place just over a mile from two wind turbines erected in 2012 by Organic Valley

and Gundersen Health System. With a combined capacity of 5 megawatts, the windmills can power about 1,000 homes, more than twice the household needs of this village of 1,102 people.

The irony was not lost on former village president Gerald Eddy, who began working on the wind turbines with the Cashton Area Development Corp. in the early 1990s and noted the the line would hinder any future development to the west or south.

“We’ve already invested the time and resources into developing our own energy plan,” Eddy said. “Now we have to pay for their lack of initiative.”

Shuttled to town by a volunteer driver, more than 100 Amish men packed the village hall in a silent show of opposition to the line.

Rudy Borntreger, whose family runs a dairy, sawmill and bakery, spoke on behalf of more than 250 families in 13 church districts surrounding Cashton, expressing concerns about health and safety especially as they drove under the lines in steel-wheeled buggies.

“Our rural life allows us a closer communion with God,” he said. “It is our sincere hope and wish to live in harmony with our neighbors, especially the English. We do not want to interfere with their lives and we know that many of them share our concerns about these proposed transmission lines.”

His English neighbors also voiced concerns for the Amish.

Kathy Kuderer, who runs a village of Amish shops and leads tours of the community, said the Amish are integral to Cashton’s economy.

Gil Hoel, whose home is in the path of the line, said routing it through the heart of the Amish community was “an insult to those who choose to live without power.”

Borntreger also noted the irony of routing the line through Wisconsin’s largest Amish settlement, which was founded in 1966 and numbers more than 1,000 members.

“We’re not using it,” he said, “so why route it through our community?”