

# Residents rail against power line, PSC in Holmen

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TOWN OF HOLLAND, Wis. -- They don't want it in Holmen, and they don't want it in Onalaska. Some don't want it at all.

At a packed hearing of the Wisconsin Public Service Commission, dozens of people spoke out Tuesday against a proposed high-voltage powerline that, if approved, would cut through either Holmen or Onalaska to extend a growing transmission network to the Madison area.

It was the second of five public hearings on the Badger-Coulee project, a joint proposal of American Transmission Co. and Xcel Energy. Another hearing is scheduled for 3 p.m. today in Cashton.

Residents from throughout the region expressed concerns about the line's impact on health, property values, economic development, quality of life and wildlife. They added their voices to the hundreds of people who have registered comments -- the majority in opposition.

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.

"It appears to me to be nothing but a boondoggle for the power companies to make money at ratepayers' expense," said James Wine, who lives near one of the routes and also cited studies linking cancer and the electromagnetic fields that surround high-voltage lines.

Two people spoke in favor of the line: Allen Gleckner works for Fresh Energy, a nonprofit group that promotes clean energy and is supporting the Badger-Coulee project; Brady Weiss represents the IBEW union, which represents Wisconsin electrical workers, and said the project would support about 1,000 jobs.

Many who spoke pointed out the impact of the southern route, which would follow Hwy. 53 to Interstate 90.

Former Onalaska Mayor Mike Giese said the city would lose hundreds of millions of dollars in economic development if the commission approves the southern route, which he called “a body blow to the city of Onalaska.”

Current Mayor Joe Chilsen noted that route runs within 300 feet of hundreds of private and commercial properties, including land recently purchased by Mayo Clinic for a future development.

“If I wanted to put a power line in the absolute worst spot, I couldn’t have laid it out any better,” Chilsen said. “This is just bad medicine.”

Residents and community leaders from Holmen noted they are already in the path of CapX2020, a high-voltage line already under construction between the southern Twin Cities and a new substation on Briggs Road. The northern Badger-Coulee route would put a second set of lines across the street and within 160 feet of Prairie View Elementary.

Prairie View’s principal presented the commission with 194 letters from students and parents as well as an anti-powerline banner signed by all 400 students.

Jay Clark, the school district’s assistant administrator, said the \$15 million school, built in 2009, would lose students and the district as a whole would suffer if the northern route is built.

In a written comment, Holmen resident Barry Truog urged the commission to make every attempt to avoid the school.

"You can't shoot a firearm within a 1000' of a school, you can't have a registered sex (offender) within 1000' of a school but You can run a high voltage power line over a school?" he wrote.

Many representing Holmen urged the commission to consider putting the Badger-Coulee lines on the same poles as CapX2020 if approved.

Others, like Peter Gutierrez of Onalaska, took issue with the approval process, noting the meeting’s 3 p.m. start shut out many of the working families who would be affected and that the PSC has yet to turn down a transmission project.

“There’s a general perception by the community that this thing is gamed,” he said. “You guys work for us. Do your jobs. Earn your salaries.”

Irene Thorelli echoed the sentiment, berating Phil Montgomery and Ellen Nowak, the two commissioners present for the meeting. (Commissioner Eric Callisto sent a message noting his term will expire before the commission makes its ruling in April.)

“I would not call your group the Public Service Commission,” she said. “You are not focused on the public, and you have not provided any service.”