

Residents flock to power line open houses

Final route will be filed with the Alberta Utilities Commission by December

Tuesday, Feb 10, 2015 06:00 am The Westlock News

By: Kevin Berger

Local landowners turned out in droves last week for two local open houses regarding a proposed 500-kilometre transmission line that may run through their properties on its way from the Edmonton area to Fort McMurray.

Alberta Powerline — a company formed from the partnership between ATCO Electric and the U.S.-based Quanta Services — was awarded a contract on Dec. 18 by the Alberta Electric System Operator (AESO) to design, own and operate the Fort McMurray West 500-kilovolt (kV) Transmission Project.

The \$1.43 billion project is comprised of a 500-kV single circuit transmission line running from a new substation in the Thickwood Hills area to the Livock substation in the Wabasca area, and from there another 400-kilometre line running to the Sunnybrook substation in the Wabamun area.

The purpose of the project is to meet increased demand in the Fort McMurray area — AESO has projected that electricity demand in Fort McMurray will almost double over the next decade.

Last week, two open houses were held at the Fawcett Community Hall on Tuesday and the Westlock Community Hall on Wednesday to gather input from landowners.

There are currently two proposed routes for the line, one running through Westlock County and the other through the County of Barrhead.

Paul Goguen, vice-president of competitive transmission for ATCO Electric, stressed that both routes are “conceptual” and may be changing based on the input from the public.

Eventually, there will be an application to the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) that specifies a preferred route, along with some alternatives, said Goguen.

The AUC will make a final decision not only based on that submission, but also the public input from a consultation process that will follow their application.

Goguen said it is important for landowners to understand they have a voice now during these open houses and “also part of the public hearing process the AUC will hold for this project.”

Goguen said they expect the AUC to make a decision by 2017, which will be followed by construction. The transmission line is expected to be in service by 2019.

When asked about the advantages of the two routes, Goguen said the Barrhead route is a bit longer, but it all comes back to understanding the impact on landowners and the environmental considerations.

“All those factors will be considered when we make the application,” he said.

A concern of many landowners is the potential health impacts from close proximity to power lines.

Goguen said there have been extensive studies going back to the 1970s by organizations like Health Canada and the World Health Organization (WHO) that demonstrate no conclusive evidence between the health of animals and people and nearby electromagnetic fields.

“We continue to monitor that research and we will continue to share that information,” he said.

Goguen stressed that while they will do their best to mitigate issues for landowners, “ultimately, a line must be built,” he said.

Approximately 40 residents turned out for the Fawcett open house and over 200 residents attended the Westlock open house.

“We’re very pleased with the turnout,” said Goguen.

Wilma Bailey, who lives west of Busby, attended the open house because the Westlock route would cut straight down the middle of her property.

Bailey said she was very disappointed by the format of the event, adding that she expected there to be a public meeting.

During the open house, ATCO and Alberta PowerLine representatives met with people one and one and asked them to fill out surveys detailing their potential concerns with the project.

Bailey said she was disappointed that they dealt with only a few people at a time and there was no opportunity to voice questions in an open forum.

When asked about her thoughts on the project itself, Bailey said she would prefer there was no project at all.

When asked why they went with an "open house" format versus a public meeting, Goguen said ATCO has been building transmission lines for several decades and finds this is a good way to interact with local residents.

Westlock County resident Ken Mead had a contrasting opinion: he said he was fine with the project as long as the companies involved "do their due diligence" and make an effort to take care of the environment and landowners.

Mead noted the proposed line runs through one of his quarters, but he was not one of those people inclined to say "not in my backyard."

He did note that he had heard some people concerned about the value of their land after a transmission line runs through it.

Goguen said that when the transmission line runs through someone's property, the company must enter an easement agreement with the landowner and there is compensation that comes into play.

Next week, there will be an additional open house held at the Barrhead Senior's Drop-in Centre on Tuesday, Feb. 10 from 3-8 p.m.

For more see Page 1 of this week's Town & Country.

For more on the Fort McMurray West 500-kV Transmission Project, visit www.albertapowerline.com.