

Substation, transmission lines will damage environment, opponents tell Planning Commission

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Every meeting Minnesota Electric Valley Co-op and Great River Energy have held on their proposed substation and transmission line project has been well attended.

The Le Sueur County Planning and Zoning Commission public hearing on the proposed project Thursday night was no different, as nearly 50 residents filed into the 4-H Building in Le Center.

So much information was presented from both sides, that commission chair Jeanne Doheny suggested no decisions be made, and that each side collect data and answers before continuing the meeting July 7.

The audience was there to watch and/or have their say as MVEC and GRE each applied for a conditional use permit to build a new substation and transmission line, respectively.

The new MVEC substation has been proposed for the west side of 320th Street and south side of Myrick Street east of Le Sueur. The proposed GRE line would run north on the west side of 265th Avenue, and then turn west along 320th toward the substation.

MVEC went first and after a plethora of questions from board members, community member Emily Pollack was allowed to intervene, using a state statute to allow her equal chance to represent her side.

Pollack is the daughter of John Pollack, who owns property on 320th Street near the beginning of the route. She has been working since the first meeting, held in January, to force more extensive environmental impact studies from the two companies.

Much of her work ended up for naught, though, as her petition, with over 200 signatures, calling for an Environmental Assessment Worksheet was refused by the state Environmental Quality Board.

The 69 kV transmission line is exempt from being petitioned by state law, and the EQB determined the substation could not be considered separately from the line.

So Pollack was left with the task of convincing the Planning and Zoning Commission of the potential negative impact of the substation and transmission line. She said the substation was being located in an environmentally sensitive area. That sensitive area features one of the county's largest bio-diversity forests within 150 feet of the proposed building, according to Pollack.

"It's actually a very unique area in the county," Pollack said.

Pollack had documents upon documents about the potential negative environmental impact of the project, as well as information on the archaeological and historic traits of the area.

About 10 Le Sueur residents used the hearing to voice their own complaints, which seemed to center around MVEC's insistence on building a new substation rather than upgrading the nearby St. Thomas substation.

MVEC representative Marvin Denzer attempted to explain the company's reasoning.

"We have engineering studies that would support that [what the company currently has in the area] could not support the load with the growth in the area," he told the board.

Denzer explained that the St. Thomas substation feeders were already using over 100 percent of their load-bearing capacity. He and other MVEC representatives said that the new substation was needed to account for new growth and to allow the two substations to serve as back-up for one another.



GRE Representative

A representative from Great River Energy speaks to the Le Sueur County Planning and Zoning Commission at a June 11 public hearing in Le Center. (Philip Weyhe/Le Sueur News-Herald)

After a resident asked if the substation would be primarily serving one customer, Cambria, MVEC said the company was preparing for potential growth in a wide area, including the Le Sueur industrial park, Hwy. 169 corridor and in Le Sueur.

Board member Shirley Katzenmeyer doubted the likelihood of expansion at the industrial park, and asked the company to provide some kind of proof that Le Sueur had plans to expand its industry. The board also asked MVEC to come back with data on the approximate 12 locations they said they had turned down for the substation site, as well as on their long-term plan among other things.

Pollack also spoke on the potential problems of the GRE transmission line in the area, which more directly affects her father's property. She specifically pointed out the low water table in the area and concerns with the chemical, pentachlorophenol, used at the base of the poles to prevent degradation of the wood.

Great River's Environmental Engineer Mark Strohfus argued that the risk the chemical present is negligible, and said the basis behind most of the uneasiness came down to a need to understand.

"The problem with any new development project is the fear of the unknowns," he said.

He also claimed that the county's Environmental Impact Statement process was unique, and actually more in depth than the state's Environmental Worksheet Assessment, implying that the project had already come under more than enough scrutiny.

Both companies and Pollack were asked to gather any further information and data they wish to present, and get it to the board before the July 7 meeting to be held in the same location. GRE representative Jenny Guardia said the company has no issue with the extended process.

"We encourage the public to actively participate in the permitting process and we're committed to working with the communities we serve in an open and transparent way," she said.

The county originally had until July 2 to make a final decision on the project, but will now look to have the deadline extended 60 days from the original deadline.