

The battle to bury....

City to contribute \$20,000 more in effort to get ATC transmission line placed underground

by MATT GEIGER

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The Middleton City Council voted unanimously on Tuesday, Nov. 18 to continue aiding the fight to force a proposed 345-kilovolt power transmission line underground.

The council agreed to provide \$20,000 in funding to Coalition for an Underground Alternative (CUA), a group of business owners and municipalities attempting to convince the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) to bury a line proposed by the American Transmission Company (ATC).

The funding being offered by Middleton is contingent on similar contributions from the cities of Monona and Fitchburg.

It was more than two years ago that Middleton first passed a resolution in support of placing the power line, which would link a power substation in Rockdale with one in the Town of Middleton and might end up running along the Beltline highway, underground.

ATC, a for-profit business created by the state legislature to oversee power infrastructure needs, has so far resisted pressure from several groups.

In 2006, 76 percent of voters in Dane County voted yes on a referendum saying they favored an independent study of whether the need for a new transmission line

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existed. The only such study to date was paid for by ATC, and the PSC ultimately denied the need for a new study.

In January of 2007, the Middleton City Council voted to join CUA, giving the group \$5,000. The coalition does not dispute the need for a new line, but hopes to sway those in power to place it underground.

A final decision from the PSC is expected by July of 2009.

Two routes are being considered for the project: a northern route that generally follows the Beltline Highway and cuts through the City of Middleton, and a southern route that goes through more rural areas. The line would be approximately 32 to 55 miles long depending on the route selected.

The northern route would involve 146 120-foot tall poles placed approximately every 400 to 600 feet along the Beltline from Interstate 39/90 to USH 14 in Middleton.

CUA has filed as an intervenor before the PSC and is currently raising awareness and money to defend its case for an underground alternative in court.

Alderman Bill Hoeksema (Dist. 1) said Middleton's support for the group results from the adverse impact an aboveground line would have on aesthetics, and therefore property values, in the city.

"This is going to be very expensive...[but] there are a lot of folks who have a lot to lose if we don't mount our best defense here," he stated.

ATC has consistently gone on

record in favor of placing the line aboveground, saying the technology to economically place it underground does not exist, and that maintenance concerns are prohibitive. At last

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Tuesday's meeting, alderman Steve Leo (Dist. 8) disagreed.

"It's pretty much a solved problem," Leo commented. "ATC has taken the position that this is some new and exotic technology - in fact it's not, and it's been done all over Europe."

While the council's support for CUA was unanimous, aldermen Jon DiPiazza (Dist. 3) and Gurdip Brar (Dist. 2) both asked for more detailed cost comparisons.

"Is [the cost of burying the line] twice as much [as placing it aboveground]? Three times as much?" DiPiazza asked.

At the meeting representatives said they are unable to give a solid answer. According to the CUA web-

site, the cost differential, amortized over 20 years, will be "less than a can of soda a month per ratepayer."

CUA also contends that if property values decrease as the result of an aboveground transmission line, municipalities such as Middleton will be forced to raise taxes to make up for lost revenue.

Alderman Hans Hilbert (Dist. 7) said the city would not likely be asked for more money from CUA in the future due to the fact that a decision is scheduled within a year. He also asked Hoeksema, who Mayor Kurt Sonnentag charged two years ago with serving as the council's liaison on the power line issue, if the city is "on the right track to [warrant] putting down another \$20,000?"

"Yes...but I don't have a crystal ball and I can't tell you if we are going to win this thing," Hoeksema replied.

Attorney Harvey Temkin, of the firm Reinhart, Boerner, Van Deuren, spoke to the council on behalf of CUA, echoing Hoeksema's sentiments.

Sonnentag also voiced support for the coalition.

"There are no guarantees here...but we sat here two years ago and said we would do everything we can to get this thing underground through Middleton," Sonnentag stated. "That's the path we've chosen."

If the line is approved, ATC plans to have it built and in service by 2013.

For more information visit www.burytheline.com and www.atcllc.com.

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