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ATC postpones Cardinal-Hickory Creek project

At the meeting of the Dodgeville Kiwanis Club Monday, April 25, guest speaker Jon Callaway from the American Transmission Company (ATC) announced the postponement of the proposed Cardinal-Hickory Creek transmission line project. The Cardinal-Hickory Creek Project would connect ATC's Cardinal Substation in the Town of Middleton with Midwest ITC's Hickory Creek Substation in Dubuque County, Iowa.

Work on the transmission line project was originally scheduled to begin in 2016 and has now been delayed until 2018 or later, Callaway reported.

The project came about when The Midcontinent Independent System Operator, Inc., the regional electric transmission organization, approved the need for the approximately 125-mile, 345,000-volt project as part of a portfolio of 17 transmission line projects that were identified as Multi-Value Projects.

ATC reports that these projects are expected to deliver multiple benefits to electric consumers across the Midwest by improving electric system reliability, providing economic benefits to utilities and electric consumers and expanding electric infrastructure to support public policy for greater use of renewable energy.

Although a representative from ITC Midwest stated he thought the delay in the project was due to complexities related to 'two very different state regulatory processes' between Iowa and Wisconsin and other 'federal processes,' Rob Danielson, secretary of Save Our Unique Lands (SOUL) Wisconsin, stated he believes the delay is due to ATC no longer being comfortable with estimated returns from the project.

"ATC is a very persistent company and plans large transmission projects like Cardinal-Hickory Creek many years ahead," said Danielson. "If ATC pauses, they must not be entirely comfortable with their proposal - perhaps the monetary benefits they hoped to present to the PSC (Public Service Commission) are weak."

"Demand for electricity in Wisconsin has been trending downward since 2005 and potential savings from transmission expansion projects have become razor thin," he continued. "Up front costs for Cardinal-Hickory Creek are very high and the line would be the eighth expansion project picked up by Wisconsin electric customers in the last nine years. Wisconsin's electric rates, now highest in the Midwest, are definitely showing growing pains."

ATC was the first multi-state transmission-only utility in the United States. It now maintains 9,540 miles of lines and 545 substations. It does not control the generation of power, nor does it distribute power to the customers; it only moves power across states.

Callaway passed around samples of the wires that varied in diameter depending on how much electricity they carried at the meeting Monday. Kiwanis members asked many questions of him, including questions on the cost and scope of the project. ATC plans to continue with the public review of the Cardinal-Hickory Creek proposal with open houses hosted by ATC, ITC Midwest and Dairyland Power Cooperative in May, showing potential routes that will be narrowed down in subsequent meetings. Meetings scheduled for this area include: Tuesday, May 17 - Pioneer Lanes, Platteville; Wednesday, May 18 - Deer Valley Lodge, Barneveld; and Thursday, May 19 - Deer Valley Lodge, Barneveld.

"Investing in a robust transmission system is necessary for regional reliability and to support lower and stable energy prices by reducing congestion," Ben Porath, Dairyland vice president, power delivery said. "Cardinal-Hickory Creek will also support renewable energy policy. As Dairyland continues to diversify its generation portfolio with more renewable resources, the ability to access and transport renewable energy in the region will only grow in importance."

The open houses will follow those held in October 2014, which aimed to introduce the project in Wisconsin. Callaway encouraged the public to attend and learn more about the project.

"We understand people have questions about the project and our plans, and these open houses will be a good way for the public to get updates and offer their perspectives," Callaway said. "We look forward to meeting with the public and talking about their involvement in the routing and regulatory processes."

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