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Committee to look at power plant options

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ESCANABA — Proposals for converting Escanaba's power plant to use a different type coal or biomass will be pursued, the Electric Advisory Committee decided Wednesday when members agreed to seek engineering studies.

Because of an increasing demand for electricity, coupled with an aging 50-year-old power plant, the city has been exploring future energy supply options.

The city will seek a cost study on converting its eastern coal-fired power plant to burn a less expensive western coal. A study on converting the facility to use biomass fuel, such as wood chips, is also being sought.

In addition to the coal and biomass studies, two proposals to purchase power wholesale also continue to be considered by the city, said Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski.

The two companies, both from Wisconsin, presented power purchase proposals to the city earlier this year.

One company offered to sell Escanaba 100 percent of the power the city needs if the power plant were closed, Furmanski said. The other company said it could provide 100 percent of the city's power and the city could do whatever it wanted with its power plant. That includes allowing the city to sell on the market, energy the plant generates itself, he said.

The two utilities recently submitted proposals to buy biomass-fueled power from the city and stated they would purchase the bio-energy if it was cheap enough, Furmanski said. In that case, the city would rather opt to sell its excess energy on the power market itself, he added.

The two power companies did not offer a buying price for the possible bio-energy but said in their proposals that each would purchase such power if the cost was at or close to the price of wind energy, Furmanski told committee members.

In other business, sub-committees were formed to study various electric-related issues including upcoming legislation in the state, power purchase options, alternative energy, a renewable energy economic zone, energy conservation, community outreach and a power plant efficiency upgrade.

Public comment at Wednesday's meeting included the following: concerns about the western coal the city will be testing at the power plant; pollution and alternative energy options; doing an efficiency upgrade at the power plant; and questions about a recent engineering study on power purchase proposals received by the city.

City Manager Jim O'Toole said electric officials will post on the city's Web site, answers to questions and concerns presented Wednesday.

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