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Residents sound off on Esky electric issues

By Laura Mead

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ESCANABA - The Escanaba's Electrical Advisory Committee held a town hall meeting Wednesday which provided residents the opportunity to discuss, ask questions, and share opinions on energy issues and what will become of the city's power plant.

The meeting began with City Manager Jim O'Toole and Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski going over a PowerPoint presentation which listed and informed citizens of the options being considered for the power plant.

Options include constructing a new plant, purchasing full-service energy from an outside source, continuing to operate the plant "as is" and improving plant efficiencies at existing facilities. Several other options that would supplement the base load source of energy, such as wind and biomass generation, were also discussed.

Concerning the future of the power plant, the EAC will ultimately make a recommendation to the Escanaba City Council, and the council will make the final decision. One issue raised by a citizen was whether the public would be able to vote on the power plant issue.

Committee members said until there is a specific proposal on the table, it will be difficult to evaluate whether or not it would require a vote of residents.

One instance when it would require a vote of the people is if the city chose to pursue divesting the power plant as a public asset. "No matter what happens the public will be fully informed and have a chance to respond," said Escanaba Councilman Gilbert Cheves. "That's why we're having these public meetings now. We want the public's input. We want an informed community."

The public also showed concern for the loss of local jobs if the plant were sold or closed.

Committee member and Escanaba Power Plant Superintendent Jerry Pirkola was asked to give the public an idea of how many employees would lose their jobs if the plant were to close.

"There are 25 to 27 employees at the Escanaba generating system," he said. "I don't know if the city would absorb many of the jobs. Potentially there would be three to four to five jobs that would be saved if the plant was closed."

The committee and the public were divided on which would have a more negative impact on the local economy - the loss of jobs or citizens and business owners paying higher electric rates.

Downtown Development Authority Director Roger Good said he would not want small, downtown business owners paying higher utility rates when the community was trying to build up its economic base.

"I don't want to see people lose jobs, but we need to think about keeping reasonable rates," he said. "We need to keep small businesses in mind."

Committee member Pete Baker said he didn't think there was one answer to the problem, instead the city should take several diverse approaches with its energy production.

"We need to diversify," he said. "It's important to manage your own destiny. When you turn it over you lose control, and that doesn't necessarily mean we keep ownership of the plant, but we keep control over it."

Baker felt having many sources of energy, including supplemental sources like biomass, would be the best route for the power plant.

Overall, committee members felt the forum was a necessary event. "A couple questions were raised with respect to the vote of the people, and with that we will pursue a legal opinion," said O'Toole. "I think jobs were very important to all the people of the community."

"We got good input from the community and people can read and get more questions answered by looking at the Web site," added Furmanski.

Questions and information on the options being considered for the power plant can be found at www.escanabaenergy.com.

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