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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA – The City of Escanaba is moving closer to constructing a new power plant but it's a long road to travel before this destination is reached.

Two years ago the city did a power supply study identifying the need for more power for Escanaba. An environmental impact study is currently underway and expected to be completed next month. A feasibility study, systems impact study and a facilities study are expected to take another two years.

"I think (the studies) are going fairly smoothly but just not fast enough for me," said Electric Superintendent Robert Headden following Thursday's city council meeting. Council approved funding for a "large generator interconnection study." This study is conducted in three phases, Headden said. First a feasibility study is done to determine if it's worthwhile for the city to proceed with a new power plant. Second is a system impact study and third is a facilities study.

These three studies are expected to cost from \$160,000 to \$170,000, Headden said. Wisconsin Public Power Inc. (WPPI) has entered into a cost-sharing agreement with the city to pay for half of the three studies' costs. WPPI has also agreed to pay half of the current environmental impact study known as the Environmental Fatal Flaw Analysis or EFFA, he said.

WPPI is helping the city pay for half the above consultant work in exchange for the right to own a share of the new power plant, Headden said. The partnership between the city and WPPI has yet to be worked out, he added, but is anticipated "down the road."

The power supply study, conducted two years ago, determined the least costly way to provide more power to meet the city's increasing needs was to build a power plant, Headden said. The larger the plant, the lower the cost would be to provide more power, he added.

"Hooking up with WPPI is an excellent opportunity for us...to build a larger plant and reduce the unit costs," Headden said. "It's a good situation to meet the city's power requirements."

WPPI buys into power plants to supply power for several municipalities in the region including 30-40 cities and towns in Wisconsin, he said. Until a new power plant is constructed in Escanaba, the city will be "hard pressed to meet its power needs," Headden said. "Without a new plant, it will be a very difficult situation to supply power for our growth."

During the past few years, the city's power plant has exceeded its plant capacity to meet power demands, he said. In the year 2002, the city exceeded its plant capacity by about 135 hours. The following year, it exceeded capacity by about 98 hours. In 2004 plant capacity was exceeded by about 145 hours. So far this year, plant capacity has been exceeded 417 hours, Headden said.

The plant's generator won't provide enough hours and there are limited hours on the peaking generator, he said. Headden attributes the increased power needs to the city's continual growth. In the past, line crews would trim trees in the winter. Lately line crews have been installing new lines to extend service for new construction, he said.

At Thursday's meeting, Council approved an amount not to exceed \$100,000 for the city's share of the large generator interconnection study for the proposed Escanaba and WPPI Power Generation Joint Project.

The large generator interconnection study is required by the Midwestern Independent System Operator - which controls the transmission system - and the American Transmission Company - which owns the transmission lines in the area, Headden explained. These two companies will perform an engineering study to determine if transmission lines can handle extra generation put out by a new power plant, he said. The study will identify the maximum-sized plant that can be built without negatively affecting the transmission system, he added.

The \$50,000 EFA study is necessary for the Environmental Protection Agency to approve an emissions permit for a new plant, Headden said. The impact of three different-sized plants - 60 megawatts, 150 megawatts and 250 megawatts - and their affect on the environment will be analyzed. This study includes the impact of potential emissions on the Seney Wildlife Refuge, he added. The report also will explore different fuel options and determine cost projections and fuel availability.