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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA - During the past year, Escanaba has made great strides towards development of a proposed new power plant that could meet the city's growing energy needs and replace its out-dated and inefficient facility, nearly 50 years old.

According to City Manager Jim O'Toole, progress is being made on the power plant proposal and time lines are on schedule for the "Escanaba Energy Project." "It's on target, on time, on budget - all good news," O'Toole commented recently at a weekly public update of city happenings. "It's moving aggressively forward," he added.

Not only is the city exploring development of a new power plant, the agencies which control and own the transmission lines are conducting their own study. The city is also looking into its electric distribution system and what would need to be done to make it compatible with a larger power plant.

The Midwestern Independent System Operator - which controls the transmission system - and the American Transmission Company - which owns the transmission lines in the area - are conducting a large generator interconnection study. The engineering study will determine if transmission lines can handle extra generation put out by a new power plant. The study will also identify the maximum-sized plant that can be built without negatively affecting the current transmission system.

So far, the city has received a favorable environmental impact analysis of the site. The Environmental Fatal Flaw Analysis was completed a year ago, stating a new facility at the power plant's present site would not be an environmental problem. RTP Environmental Associates Inc. of Cedarburg, Wisc., compiled the study at a cost of \$50,000.

Currently underway is a \$465,000 feasibility study to determine the most appropriate technology and size of plant to match the local site. The study will explore costs to build, own and operate a 60-, 150- and a 300-megawatt plant. Sargent & Lundy, LLC, of Chicago is conducting the study.

The feasibility study will include technology needed for each baseload, a site evaluation and a preliminary design, said Tom Longlais, a partner with Sargent & Lundy. Also included in the report will be a list of permits, the cost of the project and the project schedule, he said.

Sargent & Lundy has been in the business of serving electrical power companies for 115 years, Longlais said, adding the firm is looking forward to working with the city and Wisconsin Public Power Inc. (WPPI) on the project.

WPPI is sharing the costs of the above studies with Escanaba because the electric utility is interested in being a partner with the city in building a new power plant. WPPI is a non-profit municipal electric utility that serves 43 municipal utilities, supplying electricity to more than 160,000 customers in Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. WPPI needs more baseload generating resources to meet the growing needs of its members and to replace expiring electricity purchase contracts.

"We're pleased to join with Escanaba in conducting a feasibility study," said WPPI Director of Asset Optimization Tim Noeldner. "By working together, we hope to meet regional electricity needs at a lower cost than either utility could achieve on its own. WPPI and Escanaba are seeking the most responsible way to provide electricity to the customers of Escanaba and the member communities of WPPI for the years to come."

Noeldner said more information is needed before a decision is made about the plant. "The feasibility study is the next step in determining whether it would make sense to add generation from Escanaba to WPPI's diverse portfolio of resources, which includes power from wind, water, coal and natural gas," he said.

The city has hired Gilbert Cheves as a consultant to oversee the entire proposed power plant project for Escanaba. Cheves, president of Construction Consultants of Michigan, Inc., has been meeting with city officials and community leaders to keep them updated on developments.

As the city explores its options for a new and larger power plant, calls of interest have been received from industries looking to possibly develop here if a new facility could meet their needs, Cheves said. A new power plant would also provide more jobs locally, he added.

To better inform and involve the public in the process, the city has hired a public relations firm to educate citizens about the proposed power plant. Information will be presented at churches, community centers and service clubs where input will also be gathered from the public. These discussions will begin after the first of the year so residents can make an informed decision on constructing a new facility, Cheves said.