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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA - Escanaba's mayor and city manager were in a power struggle over the power plant Thursday. The battle took place during council's regular meeting.

Mayor Judi Schwalbach criticized City Manager Doug Terry for not yet hiring a project manager for a proposed new power plant now in a critical stage. The city needs to hire someone to fill in for Electric Superintendent Robert Headden who is on medical leave for an unspecified time. Terry said he doesn't want to make a hasty decision on a replacement but wants to gather input from others and hire someone in the best interest of the city.

Escanaba is in the process of conducting studies and negotiating partnerships for a potential new power plant estimated to cost \$550 million. On May 1, Headden went on medical leave until June 6 or later. At the city's May 4 meeting, council directed Terry to investigate the hiring of a power plant manager.

Terry said he's been communicating with electric specialists including Mike Furmanski, the city's electrical engineer who has been named interim electric superintendent in Headden's absence, and Pat Fulsher, power plant manager.

Terry also told council he is meeting Monday with the city's electrical advisory board to get its input on hiring a project manager. A representative from Wisconsin Public Power Inc. (WPPI), which is considering partnering with the city on the new power plant, plans to participate in this meeting.

"I have great concerns over this...this is a huge deal," Schwalbach said after Terry informed council of Monday's meeting. Schwalbach said she's concerned a project manager has not yet been hired while the city is in the middle of negotiating a partnership with WPPI and possibly a third party.

"We can't risk this deal...There are so many decisions that are critical right now...This is floundering at best," she said, reminding Terry that council directed him to hire a project manager. Terry responded by saying, "We are not floundering at best. I take exception to that."

Terry said businesses and citizens can be reassured their electric needs are being considered. He said the city needs a project manager to look at Escanaba's best interest, adding this will be addressed at Monday's electric advisory board meeting. "Now is not the time to abandon me," Terry told Schwalbach. "I take exception to that," Schwalbach responded.

Councilman Wayne Heikkila repeated that the council directed the city manager to proceed with hiring a project manager.

Schwalbach expressed concerns that Terry is being led by the advisory board rather than being advised by its members. She asked him if he had advertised for the position and if he knows what talent is out there. "Where are we going with this?" she asked.

Terry said an individual or a firm could be hired for the job. He has contacted the former electric superintendent and has asked for information from other specialists. He also wants to discuss the matter with the electric advisory board.

Schwalbach said she sees direction from the advisory board and not Terry. Terry said her criticism was unfair and unjustified. He said the project manager update was put on the agenda without his knowledge. Schwalbach said the item was on the agenda beforehand and should not have been a surprise to him.

Terry said the engineering firm, hired to analyze the potential power plants costs, is re-evaluating the spreadsheets and he has been meeting with other city administrators reviewing the cost estimations. Councilman Leo Evans said, "Don't we need someone who specializes in this?" Terry agreed that someone with electrical knowledge is needed and that the project is "far beyond our comprehension and expertise." But that decision, he added, needs to be made in the best interest of the city. "That was the point weeks ago," Schwalbach said, adding that Terry can't say there wasn't enough time to hire a project manager. "We want someone in there negotiating for our citizens," she said, referring to Monday's meeting.

"There's one more thing to make clear," Schwalbach said. "We are looking for an individual that can carry us through." "I know my job and I know the importance of this project," Terry said, adding he doesn't want to rush into a decision. "I will use my citizens and my boards...and use my e-mails that I've received...in replacement of Mr. Headden."

Schwalbach said, "I just don't know where to take this." Heikkila said, "So we're moving this up another week from where we should have been."

When asked after the meeting if he was given a deadline for hiring a project manager, Terry said he was not. "The important thing is that we hire someone that has in-depth knowledge of electricity that will work with the city administration and guide us," Terry said. "I don't believe it's in the city's best interest to select somebody or a firm we're not comfortable with."

When Schwalbach was questioned after the meeting about a deadline for Terry to hire a project manager, she said, "We told him to do it." She also said she put the item on Thursday's agenda a week ago. Terry had been out of town for a few days and returned Wednesday.