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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA - Escanaba is looking for two consultants as it seeks to meet the growing electric needs of the city. Both positions were discussed during a meeting of the city's electric advisory committee Monday.

A project consultant is needed to look out for the best interests of the city as it considers various energy options including building a new power plant (See related story). Another consultant is needed to engineer a proposed power plant which the city is considering partnering with Wisconsin Public Power Inc. (WPPI) and other potential partners if a plant is built.

City Manager Doug Terry informed the committee the city is working on a cost-sharing agreement with WPPI for a preliminary design on a new power plant. The cost of the design would be shared by the city and WPPI.

Terry said a new power plant is just one of a number of options the city is exploring to meet future electric needs. The city is considering other alternatives such as expanding the current power plant or buying energy from other sources, he said. Terry said the the cost-sharing agreement between the city and WPPI does not commit either party to building a power plant. Hiring an engineering consultant is an opportunity to get answers and do an analysis toward a design of "what could be a power plant," Terry said.

Two WPPI representatives met with city administrators for more than two hours Monday discussing the joint agreement to hire an engineering consultant for a proposed plant. WPPI developed the agreement draft, not yet signed by the city. The two representatives will take the agreement back to their company to "tweak and edit" some "minor issues," Terry said. The agreement will then be presented to the electric advisory board for its endorsement and then to city council for approval.

The agreement's timeline calls for a bidding process with the hiring of a consultant by August, said Tim Noelder of WPPI. Study work should be completed by September, he said. A final design of a power plant should be completed by the project consultant by January 2007, followed by licensing and permitting, Noelder said.

WPPI would be responsible for supervising a project manager during the design process to make sure the work gets done, Terry said. WPPI also would develop the request for proposal, also known as an "RFP", to hire the project consultant, he said.

Committee member Glendon Brown, attending his final committee meeting because of his term limits, said, "I've very glad WPPI is involved in this process...They bring the expertise to the table that we don't have."

WPPI representative Peter Steitze said he appreciated Brown's comment and said, "We'll do everything we can to live up to that...It's very important to do that study, to start out right." Steitze said WPPI has been involved in the construction of two other power plants and is part owner of another facility.

An engineering firm is analyzing costs for three different-sized power plants - 60, 150 and 250-megawatt plants - based on spreadsheets prepared by Electric Superintendent Robert Headden who is on medical leave, Terry said.

Earlier this month, council approved hiring the firm of Lutz, Daily and Brain, LLC, from Kansas, to conduct an in-depth expert review of the city's power plant needs and various scenarios in developing future energy.

The city needs a new power plant because its existing 25-megawatt plant is inefficient and outdated. Since the facility went into service in 1958, the city has grown considerably and so has its power needs. During the past few years, the power plant has exceeded its plant capacity to meet demands. Depending on results of required studies, a new power plant could be in operation by 2011, if approved by city residents.