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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA - Hiring a project consultant to look out for the city's needs as it looks into building a power plant, was among the agenda items at the Escanaba Electric Advisory Committee meeting Monday.

The same subject created a battle of words between the mayor and city manager at the city council meeting last week. Mayor Judi Schwalbach was upset Thursday because Terry had not hired a project manager as he was directed by council two weeks prior. Terry said he didn't want to rush into a decision and wanted input from others including the electric advisory board.

City Manager Doug Terry commented in regards to Thursday's council meeting during Monday's committee meeting. "There's a lot of anxiety out there to make sure we take the right steps," Terry said Monday. "I know that her (the mayor's) heart is in the right place to do the right thing." He added, "We're beyond that, we're moving forward."

After the meeting, Schwalbach said, "Disagreements happen every day in life. My role as mayor is to ensure council's orders are carried out." She said the city needs a consultant now to negotiate what Escanaba's needs in a cost-sharing agreement currently being worked out with Wisconsin Power Plant Inc. (WPPI) (See related story). The company is interested in partnering with the city in the construction of a new power plant.

Schwalbach also said city council should have been given the same respect Thursday that the electric advisory committee was given in Terry's update on the power plant Monday.

Terry presented the committee a profile of what the city is looking for in a project consultant. The project consultant, either an individual or a firm, will provide the city with the technical expertise to work with WPPI while also considering the city's interests, he said. The position will be posted within a week, he said.

During discussion on hiring a project manager, committee member Pete Baker repeated several times on the need and the importance of city administrators keeping the advisory committee informed on all aspects of the proposed power plant project.

Pat Fulsher, current power plant manager, agreed it's important city administrators work with the advisory board. He said it's critical to hire a project manager who can decide what's best for the city and can help decide what role the city will have in the plant.

Fulsher is managing the city's power plant. He is an employee of the Upper Peninsula Power Company which is contracted to operate the city's facility. Mike Furmanski, an electrical engineer employed by the city, is serving as interim electric superintendent while Electric Superintendent Robert Headden is on medical leave.

Baker said, "Let the committee be a part of this \$500 million power plant. We're here to serve. We wonder why we're not being used...Let committee members participate in the process." In the past, information on the proposed facility has been withheld from the committee, he said. "This is not a typical project the city administration goes through," Baker said. "The scope and magnitude of this project affects...business and the city...The city's life is dependent on the project." Terry agreed there are too many critical decisions to be made on the project and the city does not need to make any mistakes.

Schwalbach thanked the board for the time members have spent on the issue. She said she agreed with Fulsher that the city needs someone with expertise on the project. She said everyone needs to pull together as a team during the next couple of months, a critical time for the city and decisions on the power plant.