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By Jenny Lancour for the Daily Press

ESCANABA - The city of Escanaba wants to inform the public and get citizens involved in the proposed development of a new power plant, officials recently announced.

The city is forming a community outreach program and has hired a public relations company, Neil Palmer & Associates LLC, to assist in the process. The consulting firm was hired by council at its regular meeting Thursday for \$25,000.

The city of Escanaba has been looking into meeting future electric needs as its population grows and businesses develop. Its current 25-megawatt plant is not meeting the city's needs. The facility is inefficient and outdated since it went into service in 1958.

City officials and the public were updated on progress towards a proposed power plant by interim project manager Gilbert Cheves at council's meeting last week. Cheves, president of Construction Consultants of Michigan, Inc., was appointed interim project manager in June. Electric Superintendent Robert Headden was project manager but was fired from his department head position after exceeding his medical leave time earlier this summer.

The city began looking more seriously into a new power plant in 2004. At that time, the city's electric department requested a meeting with Wisconsin Public Power, Inc. (WPPI) to begin discussing options to supply power or generate power, Cheves said Thursday. In August 2005, the city and WPPI entered into a cost-sharing agreement to jointly pay for necessary studies on increased power options. An Environmental Fatal Flaw Analysis, completed in February 2006, showed no major environmental issues hindering development of a new plant or larger facility, Cheves said.

In July of this year, Escanaba City and WPPI entered into a cost-sharing agreement for an engineering feasibility study. Five firms responded with bids by the Sept. 15 deadline, Cheves said. Both Escanaba and WPPI will form committees to evaluate the proposals and the two parties will make a recommendation on a selection by mid-October. Following review by the electrical advisory committee and approval from city council, the feasibility study will begin with completion slated for May or June, Cheves said.

The study will evaluate the most appropriate technology and size of the plant needed in Escanaba, he said. Costs, siting and environmental issues will also be included in the study as the city explores its options, Cheves said.

To allow better understanding of the proposed project, a committee of the public will be developed, Cheves told council. The community outreach program will inform the community and give the the public a better understanding of power plant options so an informed decision can be made, Cheves explained. Public outreach will begin with public forums. The city's Web site will also include information on the project, he said.

The public relations/consulting company will meet with citizens, businesses and interest groups to give them a better understanding of the project to date and what options are available to the city to meet its electric needs, said Neil Palmer, founder of the consulting company, attending Thursday's meeting. Each option will be studied with the pros and cons to be discussed during open house events and project presentations, he added.

When the city decides on the size and costs of a new power plant, the city and WPPI will enter into a development agreement, if they decide to do so, Cheves said. The percentages the city and WPPI will be paying for construction, will be determined, depending on each party's power needs.

A third partner in the power plant is also being considered, according to Mayor Judi Schwalbach. This third partner would pay its share for past studies and future costs, she added.

WPPI is being considered as a partner in Escanaba's new power plant because a new facility would generate more power than the city needs, Cheves said. WPPI is a non-profit power company that serves 43 municipalities, operating electric utilities in Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa. The company buys power from other utilities to provide power for its members at the lowest rates possible.