

# PSC gives preliminary OK for Cardinal-Hickory Creek transmission line project

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All three PSC commissioners gave preliminary OK Tuesday for a high-voltage transmission line from near Dubuque to Middleton for wind-generated electricity.

A coalition of clean energy advocates — including the Clean Grid Alliance, RENEW Wisconsin, Fresh Energy, the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy and the Center for Rural Affairs — touted the Cardinal-Hickory Creek line. The line is a joint venture by the American Transmission Company, ITC Transmission and Dairyland Power Cooperative.

Supporters say the line is needed to bolster the state's clean energy portfolio by using renewable capacity from western states with reliable wind power. Backers add that a number of clean energy projects are dependent on the line, the 17th and final so-called "multi-value transmission project" from the Midwestern grid authority Midcontinent Independent System Operator.

But critics — ranging from the state's utility customer advocacy group to wildlife conservation activists to a trio of GOP lawmakers — urged the PSC to reject the project. Those critics raised concerns over the impact the project would have on the Driftless Area in southwestern Wisconsin, the project's renewable capacity and reliability, and the line's price tag that exceeds \$500 million.

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Dem state AGs from neighboring Illinois and Michigan also took the unusual step of filing briefs counseling the PSC to reject the project. They noted that circumstances "have changed considerably, requiring additional analysis to avoid expenditure of

hundreds of millions of dollars for a line that may not be needed.” Costs of the line would be spread to multiple states in the MISO region including Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan.

All three commissioners said the vigorous debate — which Commissioner Ellen Nowak said was the “most participation we’ve ever seen from an intervenor level and from the public’s level” — influenced their decision-making process. Still, all three said in their opening statements at the hearing that they planned to support the line.

“It was not easy and I went back and forth, but for me, the risks of not building this line and being wrong are just too great,” PSC Chairperson Rebecca Cameron Valcq said. “I’m voting for the project to ensure energy reliability in our region and access to lower-cost clean energy can be achieved.”

Valcq pledged to address siting and routing concerns in order to “ensure environmental and landowner interests are protected.”

But those promises did not address the concerns of Tom Content, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board of Wisconsin. Content noted the “dramatic reduction in price of both solar energy and battery storage” and said “time has passed this project by.”

“In this project, our expert took a look at it and she said they didn’t even do modeling that showed extensive gains in terms of new renewable energy projects that would result from this line,” he told WisPolitics.com.

Tuesday’s decision by the commissioners is a “preliminary determination.” The final written order will be based on Tuesday’s discussion and returned to commissioners for a final review and approval.

Content said the only recourse for opponents at this point is to go to court but said his organization was not prepared to comment on legal action.

See Cardinal-Hickory Creek project information:

<https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/MajorCases/CardinalHickoryCreek.aspx>

See the AGs’ letter:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/190724-Mich-III-Breif.pdf>