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New Yorkers urged to vote yes on Tri-Lakes power project

By KIM SMITH DEDAM, Staff Writer

TUPPER LAKE — New York Power Authority President and CEO Richard Kessel stood under new 46-kilovolt power lines here, urging New York voters to approve Proposition 1 on the Nov. 3 ballot.

The proposition for a constitutional amendment would finalize state procedure to support new power lines that have already been run 23 miles at a cost of \$30 million.

The Tri-Lakes Reliability Project started more than two years ago to update electric service to Tupper Lake, Saranac Lake and Lake Placid.

"People don't know there's a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would allow us to do what we've already done," Kessel said.

LAND SWAP

The power upgrade passed twice through state lawmakers, as is the constitutional requirement for any exchange in Adirondack Park land. Now, it must be approved by voters.

National Grid traded 43 acres of wilderness property for six acres of state land needed to run the wires without disturbing miles of pristine, old-growth forest and spruce-grouse habitat.

Power company President Tom King released a statement at the event, calling the project "necessary to ensure the health and safety of area residents, especially during severe winter weather."

Other state agencies, including the Adirondack Park Agency, urged voters in unison to vote yes on the ballot.

And the amendment has the support of environmental groups, including the Adirondack Council.

BEATING BROWNOUTS

Tupper Lake customers are expected to pay \$3.2 million toward the project and Lake Placid rate-payers another \$6.5 million.

Lake Placid Mayor Craig Randall said "installation of this line has given Lake Placid the assurance we can continue to meet the needs of our users without unexpected brownouts or blackouts."

Both Randall and Tupper Lake Mayor Mickey Desmarais called the power upgrade "critical for economic growth."

SPREADING WORD

But the State Power Authority has not disseminated information about the constitutional vote very far outside the North Country.

Adirondack Council Communications Director John Sheehan spent much of the past six weeks traveling around New York, visiting news agencies, informing them about the project.

"We tried to get around to see every editorial writer we could. I lost count at about 20. Very few people I went to visit knew about the issue or had read anything."

It will take a yes vote from a majority of state voters to formally complete the project.

DEVELOPMENT

Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury) said the challenge with electricity in Tupper Lake was one of the early lessons she learned when she became part of the Senate seven years ago.

"It is hard to encourage anyone to come and develop new business here when you rely on generators for backup."

Pointing to three tall new power poles running high-voltage electricity, she added, "They are the nicest power poles I've ever seen."

If the constitutional amendment is not approved, Little said, an agreement with the Department of Environmental Conservation would allow lawmakers to go to another vote in 2011.

Marc Staves, a lineman for Tupper Lake Municipal Electric, described how the new switches reroute power if lines go down.

The village substation also has state-of-the-art computer monitoring that alerts crews to problems on the lines.

Power to the substation was turned off for only a short portion of a day to connect the central transformer, he said.

"I will say, on a cold day up there," he added, pointing to the top of the metal substation matrix, "you can feel the hair stand up on your arms."

THE ROUTE

The new power lines come into the Tri-Lakes region near Stark Reservoir, crossing a two-mile stretch of Forest Preserve land.

In Colton, the line carries east along Route 3, connecting to a new regulator station in Piercefield.

The wires follow 15.6 miles of highway and utility corridors. Wooden poles were used to reduce visual impact of the new power infrastructure.

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