

Adirondack Daily Enterprise
May 21, 2009

Power line finished; amendment is not

By JESSICA COLLIER, Enterprise Staff Writer

TUPPER LAKE - A new power line into Tupper Lake from the west was recently activated, making electrical service more reliable, but it is still awaiting passage of the state constitutional amendment that will allow it to exist.

Tupper Lake municipal electric Superintendent John Bouck announced at a village board meeting Monday that the line was switched on May 1. He called it a seamless transfer.

"That's quite a monumental step," Bouck said. "Tupper Lake's been in line for a new transmitter for over 30 years."

Before this line, Tupper Lake got its power only from one that travels from Malone south to Saranac Lake and splits into two dead-end lines: one that stops in Lake Placid and the other that stops in Tupper Lake. Power outages were frequent since there was no backup and branches often fell on the low lines.

"We would get notice after notice after notice that the power was out in Tupper Lake," said state Sen. Betty Little.

The new line carries in power from a hydroelectric dam near Colton on poles taller than the Saranac Lake line, which should keep branches from interfering. It will provide Tupper Lake with most of its power, and the old line will be used largely for backup.

"The region's reliability is improved by having the new line," said National Grid spokesperson Courtney Quatrino. "There's options now."

The line, however, is not quite legal yet. Alongside state Route 56, it passes through a little less than two miles of state Forest Preserve, classified as wild forest, that cannot be built on according to Article 14 of the state Constitution, which ensures that the Forest Preserve be "forever kept wild."

A bill is in the works to amend the Constitution to allow this project, as has been done for a few other projects over the years. The state Senate passed it unanimously Monday, and it should be up in the Assembly for a vote next week. If passed, it would go to a statewide ballot vote this November. If voters approve it, the state Legislature would enact it next January.

The bill already passed unanimously in the Legislature last year. A state amendment needs to be approved by two separately elected Legislatures in order to go to a vote.

All this is because it just made more sense for the line to go through the protected land. It was a straighter, shorter route through land already cleared for a road, rather than a six-mile detour cut through undeveloped forest.

So it was more environmentally sound to install the line on the protected land. John Sheehan, director of communications for the Adirondack Council, said the detour would have gone through an old-growth pine park, 95 separate wetlands and streams, and the state's best habitat for spruce grouse, an endangered species.

"That was going to be an ecological disaster," Sheehan said.

There was also a threat that the person who owned the detour's private land would sue if the state used eminent domain to usurp his property, which had the potential to stall the project significantly.

With the backing of environmental groups, National Grid and the New York Power Authority decided to build the power line so it runs alongside Route 56 through the protected land.

The new line was considered an urgent project that would affect the health and safety of Tupper Lake residents. Many locals heat their homes exclusively on electricity because it is relatively cheap, due to the municipal electrical department. So the line was installed and activated while the proper bureaucratic procedures plodded along.

"Everybody just sort of looked the other way," Sheehan said. "We don't like having to do it this way, but in these few cases, there were legitimate emergencies."

A similar case Sheehan referred to was a successful statewide vote in 2007 that allowed Raquette Lake the use of protected land for public drinking water wells.

"The fact that we have to make occasional exceptions is not surprising given the Park's enormous size and the unique nature of having private land inside a park boundary," said Sheehan. "It's going to happen from time to time."

Sheehan said he was confident the bill would pass through the Assembly and fare well in the November vote because he knew of no opposition to it.

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