

*Electric rate might go up in summer

(Continued from Page 1A) Larson, reviewing the agency's report. "You can expect blackouts a lot in the future. It's important this year that when it comes to doing the budget, we get a plan up and get it going."

Mrs. Larson also reminded the council that they need to upgrade the city's power poles and lines, and suggested they allot \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year to the project until it's done.

Mayor McFee noted that another thing the agency said at its meeting is that the city shouldn't take money out of its electric fund to pay for other programs anymore, because with the coming expenses that the energy crisis could bring, the money could just run out.

This year, said Mrs. Larson, the electric department gave \$50,000 to the general fund, \$75,000 to the special street project and \$7,600 to the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. \$75,000 was allotted to the electric reserve, she said. Normally, the city also supplements The Gateway out

of electric department as well, but didn't this year.

So if the city leaves the electric fund be this year, the updates and repairs may be possible. That's part of what the council will have to determine come budget time this summer.

Mr. Castle said that he thought it was probably a good idea to start looking at investing in our own power plant for the future.

"Six years from now," he said, "we'll be looking for another contract. We have a trial period with Sunflower ... and I can see the power just going away, with everybody waiting on it and sitting in the dark. Even one radiator would be a big improvement. But the radiators are really old, and they're really expensive when they break down."

"The sad part about this whole deal is we've spent a whole fortune on this substation (after a fire last year) and not a penny on the real problem. Our options get tighter and tighter all the time. We have to make a choice and go that direction."



SQUINTING IN THE AFTERNOON SUN, Justin Byarlay of Mid-States Energy Works out of Salina surveyed part of the city's main electrical substation during repairs in October. --Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

*City closes phase

(Continued from Page 1A) Work should start this summer on the second phase, including the well field and pipelines.

"This project's been in the works for quite a while and I think we're finally going to get it all done," said Chris Miller of Miller and Associates, the engineering firm of McCook that's been working on the project.

He went on to say that the process of acquiring water rights for the wells went a lot better than anticipated, and that he hopes to have them finished by the next council meeting at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 20. He credited Mrs. Larson and the others who worked on the project with making it go smoothly.

"It just goes to show that when you get the right people working on something like this, it can go quicker than you realize," he said.

The next deadline for the project, he said, is to have all the specifications ready to go by June 1. After that, the city will call for bids in phases. After bids have been accepted, he said, construction can begin.

Mr. Miller said that surveyors would be in the area over the next couple of weeks, and a crew would be taking aerial photographs, either by plane or helicopter. The technology they use, he said, is called laser radar and will render not just digital photos, but a whole 3D image of the area.

Mr. Miller said the deadline to finish the project is June 1, 2014, so they will have exactly one year to drill the wells, build a pipeline to town and get pumping started.

"We're sending out (another) letter on uranium this week," said Mrs. Larson, "so the sooner we get it done, the better."

The council has been dealing with drinking-water problems for a long time now. Initially, the city planned to build a water treatment plant to remove heavy metals, but that was scrapped when the city learned that they would have to spend \$100,000 a year to dispose of the uranium the plant would collect. Even then, the city could be held accountable for that uranium later were it to be involved in an accident or spill of any kind.

Then the council and engineers came up with a plan to drill wells to pump clean water to town. After a long time, it appears, the water problem could be solved. And those letters Mrs. Larson spoke of, constantly reminding residents of the arsenic and uranium in their tap water every four months, might stop coming.

Wind an energy answer?

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
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Electric power is an unseen force that affects everything in our daily lives. So what if that unseen force was itself propelled and created by another? What if the answer to the problem was literally blowing in the wind?

Four years ago, in 2008, the U.S. Department of Energy said it wanted wind energy to provide 20 percent of the country's electricity by 2030. The energy source has come a long way in the past two decades, and could potentially make any town energy independent, but a subsidy from the federal government may be drawing to a close. This, says Connie Grafel, marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., could put an end to the industry.

How could wind make a town energy independent, you ask? Actually, it already did, at least once, in Rock Port, Mo. Frank Morris, a reporter for National Public Radio who covered the story in 2008, wrote that Rock Port was the first town of its kind. The town of 1,300 runs off of four wind turbines that produce more energy than the residents actually use.

"Of course, the wind doesn't always blow in Rock Port," Mr. Morris wrote, "and on days when it's still, residents buy power off the grid. But on most days, the wind generates enough power for the city to export energy."

The City of Oberlin has a seven-year contract with Sunflower Electric, one of three utilities that buy power from the Smoky Hills Wind Farm outside of Salina. That farm, the cooperative's website says, has 155 turbines that can produce up to 250 megawatts of power. Sunflower uses 50 of those megawatts.

City Administrator Karen Larson said at the City Council's end-of-year meeting last December that after Sunflower purchased wind turbines, power would start

to cost less here. Those savings, however, aren't to be seen for another six months.

So in a way, wind energy is almost already here. What do those opposed to the idea have to say?

Dan Castle, who as city foreman is in charge of the city's power operation, said he doesn't think it will work. He said there are just too many problems: wind it's unreliable, needs regular energy sources (like coal) to back it up and can't store energy for later. And the city has looked into it before.

"We had an outfit in here one time trying to set the city up with wind energy," he recounted, "and it was a bunch of malarkey. It was a whole different council, but everybody frowned upon it. I'm sure some day in the future that they will maybe figure out something. But it's very expensive to put in, too. Very, very expensive."

But with the city starting down a \$740,000 bill for repairing a generator that runs on diesel fuel, it might be worth the consideration.

Which brings us back to that tricky subsidy. The wind industry relies on a federal tax credit to make it more competitive with other sources of electricity. That costs the government about \$1 billion a year, or 2.2 cents per kilowatt hour, according to *The New York Times*. In the past, the subsidy enjoyed support from both parties, but Republicans have turned against it of late.

"If Congress does not extend the tax credits for wind production, I don't see much future," said Ms. Grafel. "The subsidy is basically how they make a profit on what they are charging for power."

How Congress, or the wind energy industry, will respond to the decisions being made over the next few months is anyone's guess. But Oberlin's energy could be affected by it, whether the city considers setting up its own turbines or just relying on the turbines of others for a quick dent to utility bills.

2012 electric rates: Power by the numbers

- The last increase in electric costs Oberlin saw was in September, after Sunflower Electric Power Co., a cooperative based in Hays, raised rates by 5 percent across the board.
- As of September, residential customers pay a service charge of \$7 each month and an average charge of \$85.42 per home.
- Businesses saw an even bigger hike in September, 5.2 percent.
- Other customers got a softer blow. Agriculture rates went up by 4.4 percent,

- resulting in \$368 more to pay each year on average.
- Churches had a 4.6 percent increase, averaging \$633 more a year.
- Government buildings also shared the burden, with their rates going up by 4.7 percent, or \$3,568 a year.
- The hospital had a 3 percent increase, about \$5,534 a year.
- Schools took the smallest hit, only a 3.6 percent raise, resulting in roughly \$2,540 more to pay per meter.

Power grid unstable?

Rolling blackouts are when an energy company deliberately shuts off power to one area at a time at peak hours to prevent their system from crashing due to a short supply and high demand for power.

Brownouts, which are also a possibility for this coming summer, are when power companies temporarily reduce voltage over their entire system for the same reasons.

—source, Independent Energy Producers Association

City power plant could be first step

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
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With demand for electric energy going up and the supply going down, City Foreman Dan Castle told the Oberlin City Council that he thinks the best option is to start investing in the city's power plant again.

Even he knows that won't be easy. Environmental regulations loom large.

"Our generators," he said, "as it is now, are noncompliant with the Environmental Protection Agency, and so it's also noncompliant with the Southwest Power Pool because we don't have catalytic converters to clean up the air pollutant. So the council needs to make a quarter of a million dollar decision to put those on the engines, or be noncompliant and suffer the consequences."

Mr. Castle said that while it's not economical to run our own power plant all the time, the plant would at least be a reliable source of energy, close to home.

"It's going to be a higher cost of production for electricity," he said, "but it's always usable. There are people willing to pay the price for electricity. It baffles the mind that people will pay 20 to 30 cents a kilowatt to have it. In wintertime, no one thinks about it, but in summer, if you have some ready and available, people will buy it."

Whatever course the council chooses over the next few years — and how it chooses to deal with projected rolling blackouts as soon as this summer — Mr. Castle said that the important thing right now is to start making these choices.

"I've been doing this since 1974," he said, "so I feel we need to get on the ball here or we're going to be in trouble. We need to make our own plan and follow it. Even buying our own generator, I don't know the price, but I'm going to get the council the information. Because that may be the thing of the future."

"We can run our engines as they are 100 hours per unit, and we have five. But those 100 hours can be eaten up in no time. The newest engine in that plant is a 1973, and that tells you how old they are. Their life span is about 30 years, so most are past retirement, but they're still running.... It takes about 20 minutes to get the plant up and running in the event of an accident or storm."

The city's plant can carry Oberlin's power needs through the winter, from October to May, he said, but not through the summer, from June through September. Then, he said, it can only supply about half of the city's needs.

And it's not just the council that needs to start paying attention to the problem, he said.

"I think its going to boil down to education," he said. "When to use it, how to use it, and when to conserve. All that stuff will pay off, and we need to get started on it now, so we can keep the public aware of what's going on, because 99 percent of the time they don't know."

"I just didn't think we'd ever get back to this point. As long as we have our power plant, we can have some power some of the time, but not all of our power all of the time."

*Seat belt program spells safety for teens

(Continued from Page 1A)

I come and talk. We encourage them to do other nontraffic things, like girls' self-awareness and self-defense classes before they go off to college, so there's a constant message of safety in the school. It's not only seat belts, but also a general safety message to watch over each other and be aware.

"Kids sign a pledge card each month, and are entered into a drawing each month. We have Visa gift cards and stuff that they can win. We end the program in April and have a grand prize drawing to wrap it up. In Colby, we gave away two iPads."

The program gets \$300 from the Kansas Department of Transportation, he said, but sponsors are needed to try and make the prizes something that kids would really want.

"Our kids are a valuable resource," said Commissioner Ralph Unger.

"If we can save one kid, it'd be worth it," agreed Commissioner Stan McEvoy.

If you would like to contribute to the program, call the high school at (785) 475-2231.

In other business, commissioners:

- Ratified the purchase of two scraper tires for \$8,262 for the Road and Bridge department, as well as new snow fence for \$3,000.

Agreed to put a stop sign at the intersection of 900th Road and V Lane at the request of Liberty Township.

Heard from Fire Chief Bill Cathcart that 19 new radios are needed for the narrow-banding project and

that he is going to order them right away. The total cost will be from \$8,870 to \$9,300, he said, not counting the cost of the two repeaters the county will likely need, or the labor cost of reprogramming all of the current radios.

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