

Enbridge: Pipeline expansion to proceed

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, May 15, 2014 10:24 am

Enbridge Energies officials said on Wednesday that upgrades to the Line 61 oil pipeline running through Jefferson County would proceed, despite the county board's apprehension.

On Tuesday, the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution urging the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to reject an air quality permit the company is seeking for its Superior facility.

Though the permit applies only to an expansion project in Superior, the DNR is accepting public comment on that open permit application through May 19, allowing the Jefferson County supervisors a short window of opportunity to register their voices on another Enbridge project being undertaken in the Jefferson County area.

Enbridge Energies Line 61, which runs through Wisconsin from Superior to northern Illinois, currently carries approximately 400,000 barrels of Canadian tar sands oil per day. The pipeline crosses into Jefferson County near Waterloo and runs through the southwestern corner of the county, crossing beneath the Rock River south of Fort Atkinson just north of Lake Koshkonong.

The company plans to increase the pipeline's capacity up to 1.2 million barrels per day by 2015 through construction of several additional pumping stations along the line, including a new one outside of Waterloo in Dane County.

The Jefferson County resolution approved Tuesday not only urged the DNR to reject the Superior permit, but also asked the department to undertake a full environmental assessment of the pipeline and conduct a public hearing or public information session in Jefferson County before authorizing Enbridge to increase the fluid pressure flowing through the pipeline.

Becky Haase, a stakeholder relations specialist for the company, said Wednesday that the board's inclusion of the Superior permit was based upon false information that the expansion in that city was related to the project to increase pressure on the pipeline.

"The two projects are really pretty separate ... Really, the only relation is that they're both Enbridge projects," Haase said. "Increasing the volume on the Line 61 is going to happen regardless of what happens at the Superior terminal."

However, Don Faith, of the DNR's air-management program, said the projects are related, and that the company is installing several large tanks at the Superior station in order to hold more material coming in over the increased pipelines.

He also said that the Jefferson County resolution, if received by his office before the May 19 public comment deadline, will be considered as part of the public record during the DNR's decision.

Haase said that work to construct additional pumping stations along the pipeline's length already is under way, and will be completed in the fall.

The nearest local pumping station will be constructed just over the border in Dane County, between Waterloo and Marshall. Work on that starts in July.

The pipeline crossing Jefferson County was constructed in 2007, and carries petroleum made from oil sands from Alberta, Canada.

Oil sands also are called tar sands or, more technically, bituminous sands, and are a mixture of petroleum, clay, sand and water. Since oil sands are more dense than conventional crude oil, they usually are blended with other chemicals to allow them to flow through pipelines for transport.

Haase said Line 61, a 42-inch buried pipeline, was constructed with the intention to move large amounts of oil sands through the region, but it has not operated at full capacity since its construction.

“The economy took a pretty bad downturn shortly afterward, and there wasn’t the need for the actual capacity that was built into the pipeline,” she said. “Times have changed and now our customers want to ship more oil on that line, so we are able to nearly triple the capacity on that line simply by adding additional pump stations on that line throughout the state.”

According to Haase, additional permits are not needed to increase the pressure flowing through the pipeline at this point, because the infrastructure was approved to run up to 1.2 million barrels per day when it was constructed.

Faith said the DNR does not specifically regulate oil pipe lines, and that there is no specific Wisconsin standard that pipelines must meet. Instead, they are subject to regulations set up by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

“We built, designed, tested and operated the pipeline to operate at its intended capacity of 1.2 million barrels per day,” Haase said. “Once the pipeline is constructed, we go through a rigorous testing process where we actually pump water into the pipeline, bring the pressure up to above and beyond what it would be running at.”

One of the main concerns brought up at Tuesday’s board meeting, by citizens and supervisors alike, was the possibility for pipeline spills and leaks, causing health hazards or property damage for local residents.

Haase said the company places “much emphasis on preventing spills.”

“That’s our main goal, to keep the oil in the pipeline,” she said. “We want to keep communities and the people who live and work and play near our pipelines safe. If we’re not delivering oil, we’re not making money, so we would go out of business. So that’s our bottom line: to keep the oil in the pipelines.”

Another complaint voiced Tuesday was the seemingly-secretive nature of the project and the lack of communication, both by the DNR and Enbridge, with the municipalities through which the pipeline passes. Haase said that although Enbridge seeks to stay in touch with municipalities that are affected by its pumping stations, it is possible Jefferson County officials were not thoroughly informed about the project, and that the company will be more responsive to public questions moving forward.

“Absolutely, we want to make sure that the public has the information they need,” she said.