

Stelmach looks to burying power lines

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Concerns of nearby residents, eco considerations at heart of move

Buried transmission lines and investments in new technology could one day help Alberta deliver environmentally-efficient electricity, Premier Ed Stelmach said Wednesday.

During a lunch-hour speech, the premier highlighted his government's efforts to deal with electricity transmission needs, calling the current system "aging, congested and inefficient."

"I know that people have concerns about overhead lines," he told the Sherwood Park Chamber of Commerce, noting the province has launched an in-depth study to look at burying the lines.

"It's fair to say all Albertans bear the costs of transmission, so it is important that we understand what those costs will be before we move forward."

In the last year, many rural landowners have raised alarms at the prospect of new 500-kilovolt transmission lines being built on or near their land.

One proposal would run such lines through Strathcona County's residential area to its industrial heartland to power bitumen upgraders and other developments — an idea some say would be detrimental to their property values, landscape and perhaps their health.

Last month, Strathcona MLA Dave Quest convinced his colleagues to research burying the power lines.

"It's a local issue, of course, with the 500-kV coming through potentially," Quest said Wednesday. "There's four routes from west of the city up to the heartland. Two of the four are in Strathcona, or run through Strathcona," close to a school and homes built along the transportation utility corridor.

Many landowners near the corridors never could have imagined they would be seeing the "biggest power line possible" outside their homes, Quest said, calling it a quality-of-life issue.

"Is it a health risk? Is it esthetic?" he asked. "Fair's fair. Nobody could have foreseen a 500-kV power line because there's almost none around. At what point is a 10-storey tower acceptable, a 20-storey? Five hundred feet in the air? What's the limit? I'm suggesting that 500-kV, to me, is a bit of a stretch for anybody to have imagined."

Both Stelmach and Quest said burying the lines could save energy.

The option — and its cost-benefit analysis — will be studied as part of a full review.

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JOHN LUCAS, THE JOURNAL

Premier Ed Stelmach wants to upgrade "aging, inefficient" systems.