

Plug pulled on power line deal

by **GLENN COOK**

Saint City News

St. Albert city council is hoping the provincial government will pony up for the relocation of power lines on the west side of the city.

Councillors approved a motion at their regular meeting on Monday to ask the province and AltaLink — the company responsible for the majority of electricity transmission in Alberta — to pay for putting the lines, which run near Big Lake and the mouth of the Sturgeon River, underground or in a structure on the ground at a cost that could range from \$6.3 million to \$8.5 million.

“What a great gift it would be for the Alberta government to pay for the entire relocation in Lois Hole [Centennial] Provincial Park,” said Coun. James Burrows, who made the motion, which was passed by a 4-3 vote.

Burrows added that power lines have been put underground in the Kananaskis area of the province, and he didn't see why it couldn't be done here.

“[Kananaskis] is beautiful because there is no power line to be seen,” he

said. “I believe this is the solution to the whole problem.”

But other members of council didn't see it the same way.

“We can only go to the province asking for so much money,” said Mayor Nolan Crouse, who, along with councillors Len Bracko and Lorie Garritty, voted against the motion. “This would tip our hat that this is one of our highest environment priorities, and I don't see it that way.”

“We're dreaming in Technicolor if we think the province will come forward with \$6.5 million or more,” Garritty added.

The relocation of the power lines has been on council's radar for more than three years, and is necessary because they are along the flight paths of many migratory birds, who often collide with the shield wire at the very top of the lines, which is much thinner and harder to see.

City of St. Albert administration presented council with six options on Monday, ranging from keeping the status quo at no cost to an on-ground structure with the power lines

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embedded in it that could cost upwards of \$8.5 million and had never been done before.

Administration recommended a compromise option of keeping the lines above ground and moving them to the east side of Ray Gibbon Drive, about 650 metres away from where they are now.

“This would help in deterring by grouping our services together again,” said Leah Jackson, director of the City's office of the environment. “If we put all the impacts into one location, we would also be deterring wildlife because of that.”

However, some councillors had concerns about power poles being placed too close to Ray Gibbon Drive and to the St. Albert Soccer Association pitches, as well as in the former Riel landfill site.

But the underground option was not without its drawbacks, as Jackson pointed out that below-ground power lines require

special insulation and cooling features, and must be designed for the exact type of soil conditions present and any possible variations. Large vault structures also have to be built to be able to access the lines and service them.

The recommended option was estimated to cost \$1.05 million, of which AltaLink has already provided \$450,000 and Alberta Parks, Tourism and Recreation had committed another \$300,000. Council was asked to pledge another \$450,000, which included a contingency in case costs ran over budget.

The previous city council had made a motion in October 2007 to set aside \$350,000 for this project in the 2008 budget review process, but city manager Bill Holtby admitted that “just through human error,” that request was not included in that process.

Coun. Carol Watamaniuk, who joined the meeting by telephone, did make a motion to allocate \$350,000 for the project

from the Transfer to Stabilization Reserve in respect of the former council's motion, but that was defeated 5-2.

Watamaniuk said it was incumbent on the City to come up with their fair share of the project and to respect the motion made by the previous council.

“This is a total slap in the face [to the previous council]. It makes us look very bad,” she said.

Other councillors, though, were uneasy about using reserve money, especially heading into budget deliberations.

“There are a lot of risks and unknowns associated with this relocation. This is a capital item, and it should have been considered in the capital budget,” Crouse said. “[Taking the money out of the] Transfer to Stabilization Reserve would be a 0.75 per cent tax increase; if we're taking money out, we have to fill it up with 2009 tax money. We're faced with having to make tough decisions in the coming weeks, and we can't fund it in this way.”