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Concerns aired at hearing on AES proposal to build pier

By Thomas J. Prohaska - NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU

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AES Somerset seeks to build a pier into Lake Ontario so that coal and limestone can be brought to the plant more cheaply.

LOCKPORT — There are plenty of angles to be considered and many possible impacts to be probed before AES Corp. will be able to win regulatory permission to construct a \$25 million pier into Lake Ontario from its Somerset power plant.

At a public information session in the Holiday Inn Wednesday night, AES Somerset President Kevin R. Pierce said one of the primary reasons for the lake unloading project is to bring coal and limestone to the plant more cheaply than the current shipments by train. AES owns and maintains the Somerset Railroad, but CSX Corp. is the service provider.

Jon Reimann, project representative for AES, told an audience of about 65 that one 26,000-ton ship would carry as much coal as two 130-car trains.

Reimann said one or two ships per week would come to the 3,200-foot-long pier.

“The schedule’s going to be dictated by the operation of the Welland Canal,” he said, adding that train shipments won’t be completely eliminated. The canal is closed during the winter.

Pierce said the 675-megawatt power plant burns some 2 million tons of coal per year and uses 600,000 to 700,000 tons of limestone as part of a process that reduces the sulfur in its smokestack emissions. The limestone also would begin to arrive by ship.

Approvals are needed from state agencies such as the Public Service Commission and the

Department of Environmental Conservation, while on the federal level the Army Corps of Engineers and the Coast Guard will weigh in.

The company is hoping to complete the approval process by early 2009, which would be followed by 12 to 18 months of construction.

Thomas Butler of URS Corp., the engineering firm for the project, said AES must comply with a local waterfront revitalization plan the town passed a few years ago.

He said an environmental impact analysis would have to account for such issues as noise, potential spills, dust and visual impacts on lakefront property.

Not mentioned during the hourlong presentation but of concern to some members of the audience was the possible impact on sport fishing in Lake Ontario. Bill Hiltz Jr., Niagara County's fishing promoter, said some anglers are wondering if the pier would alter currents along the shore, possibly harming popular fishing spots and interfering with trolling by boats.

Pierce said that although the fishing angle will be studied, he didn't think there would be any harm to fisheries.

Reimann said the 17-footwide pier would rest on three piles and was designed so no dredging would be needed. Ships would moor on the east side of the pier and empty into a hopper leading to a 5-footwide conveyor that would carry the coal into the plant without any need for crews to leave the ship. Reimann said the ships could unload 3,000 tons an hour.

Somerset Supervisor Richard J. Meyers said he doesn't think the booming lakefront real estate market will be threatened.

"I think it's going to be a minimal visual impact as it stands," he said. "I've talked to several people along the lakeshore and they don't seem to be too concerned."

One such resident, Dan Hogan, remarked, "I'm not a real estate person, but I don't see [a negative impact]. A lot of people go places to see ships come in."

Pierce said AES intends to apply to the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency for a new payment-in-lieu-of-taxes arrangement for the pier. The plant received such a deal in late 2006, which reduces its payments to the county, the town and the Barker Central School District, but still left AES as the largest property taxpayer in the county by a wide margin.

Meyers said, "The impact of the PILOT on the town was minimal. Any additional income coming in for the school is important."

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