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Officials answer hard questions on power

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By Eric Martin | STAFF WRITER

Uninterested in 25-year forecasts on a proposed municipal utility, Hinsdale resident Jack Uretsky asked a final, straightforward question.

"If we go this route, will my electric bill be lower than it would be with ComEd or higher ... in the first year?" the physicist asked.

Uretsky was among residents attending a town hall meeting Jan. 25 to hear a proposal for Hinsdale to take over local electrical delivery from ComEd. Trustees plan to vote Tuesday on whether to put the measure on the April ballot.

"Sir, in the first year of the base case, it would be lower," said Robert Latham, president of the firm hired to study the feasibility of the proposal.

"Thank you," Uretsky said. "I'm for it."

Officials last week described a year of efforts to persuade ComEd to improve service, after 2005 saw Hinsdale's power outages far outpace the Chicago area average.

"The time has come for us to take action," Village President Michael Woerner said. "There has been little or no progress to date."

No ComEd representatives spoke at the meeting, although Woerner said he invited a company representative.

Luis Diaz, a spokesman for the company, said in an interview that the company looks forward to working diligently with the village and has a number of initiatives planned for 2007, including upgrading transformers and trimming trees for 30 percent of town.

"We are optimistic that we can address the reliability concerns that they have," he said.

Under the Latham and Associates report's 25-year projections, Hinsdale could gain between \$85 million and \$117 million if it takes over of ComEd's local system and the village charged the same rates.

But officials, who at the meeting adopted the slogan "Always there. Always on," made it clear that they do not plan to stop at this "base case."

"Our mission is to improve reliability, and what we are very firm in saying is that we're going to take those savings and reinvest them back in Hinsdale," village manager David Cook said.

That could mean spending \$40 million to bury 90 percent of power lines over 10 years, as well as other upgrades. That would boost reliability and still lead to a \$51 million to \$81 million potential return for the village, providing leeway to reduce rates.

Residents in the audience raised concerns about Hinsdale's ability to navigate the energy market, since it would not generate its own power. Uretsky even raised the prospect of future energy crises.

But Latham said municipal utilities form long-term contracts with suppliers, rather than a spot market. Trustee Cindy Williams, who is spearheading the municipal power drive, pointed out that Adventist Hinsdale Hospital and local school districts do not buy power from ComEd.

Residents also questioned the cost of a local utility.

"It sounds good on paper, but beware the long-term concept of more people working for the village, more pensions (and) more health costs," said Bud Wulff, a former trustee with energy industry experience.

Officials expressed confidence in Latham and Associates' numbers, which included many potential costs raised.

In a letter to the village, the Hinsdale Chamber of Commerce voiced support for the efforts to improve electrical supply. Lop Chin, owner of the Jade Dragon restaurant, also applauded the endeavor.

"I've lost thousands, thousands of dollars of business because of lost power," he said.

Even if an April referendum passes, two more ballot questions in a later election are required before a break with ComEd can become a reality.

"We are still committed to an open dialogue with ComEd," Williams said.

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