

Power company's plans in cross hairs

By **Aaron Falk**

Deseret News

Published: Wednesday, March 25, 2009 11:09 p.m. MDT

When it comes to the capital city's power plan, Luke Garrott wants to be plugged in.

The Salt Lake City councilman, after a battle between Rocky Mountain Power and a university neighborhood over a substation expansion, says he would like to see the city more involved in the utility's long-term planning.

"As a city and as neighborhoods, we have had no input on that, and that's what we're trying to change," Garrott said. "The city wants to sit at that table ... so every substation that gets expanded is not a new crisis."

Most recently, east-siders have been upset over a plan to double the size of an electrical substation at 142 S. 1100 East. Rocky Mountain Power, in a peace offering to residents, announced last week it had scaled back its design but would still need to increase voltage from 38,000 to 146,000 to handle the area's growing need.

It is a proposal "people can agree on, even if everybody isn't totally happy," said spokesman Dave Eskelsen.

Still, some wondered: What about next time?

"The city has no master plan whatsoever to deal with the expansion Rocky Mountain Power is attempting to do through the city," said Doug Harding, whose house sits next to the northeast substation. "If they set the precedent here, they'll do whatever they want in the rest of the city."

The utility submits its 10-year plan to the state's Public Service Commission, but it keeps things "kind of close to the vest" when it comes to the city, said Garrott, who represents the area.

But the plan, which identifies growth areas and outlines procedures for handling demand, is available to the public, Eskelsen said.

The city also has oversight when it comes to issuing conditional-use permits, he said, the way municipalities might have control over a gas station or tavern. And, at least in the case of the northeast substation, neighborhoods have some sway.

Harding tested for radiation levels and dangerous emissions, while others in the neighborhood said the taller substation would obstruct views, causing property values to fall.

In the end, Garrott lauded the utility for shrinking the substation plan, lopping off as much as 20 feet from the height of its original proposal.

The new plan was presented to neighbors last week during an open house, a meeting that went "over and above" the state's legal requirements, Eskelsen said.

Overall, "the process has been tried and true over many decades," he said.

Still, it is a process that needs tweaking, said those who want to help shape Salt Lake's long-term energy plans, including the use of "smart grid" technologies.

"That would likely require a change in the state's energy policy," Eskelsen said. "The utility uses proven, off-the-shelf technologies. We typically don't do research and development. The kind of infrastructure that we're talking about in the use of smart grids is a tremendous investment in infrastructure."

But as demand continues to grow across the board — even in built-out areas — the power company will have to continue to expand its substations and services, Eskelsen said. The northeast substation has reached 93 percent capacity, which could mean problems for the 5,000 homes it powers if the expansion isn't completed by next summer, he said.

Garrott, meanwhile, hopes the city won't be left in the dark.

"The city wants to have a say and be a partner because business as usual always takes the path of least resistance," he said. "If we actually do create a partnership, the benefits would be magnificent and widely shared by all, including the power company."

E-MAIL: afalk@desnews.com

© 2009 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved