

Village officials, residents frustrated by expense of burying electrical lines

Village of Fredonia officials said at an informational meeting last week they would love to see the utility lines along Fredonia Avenue buried when the community's major thoroughfare is rebuilt.

However, they said it will be up to residents to decide whether they can stomach the tax hike that will come along with the optional project. That is the reason for an April 3 advisory referendum on the matter.

About two dozen residents attended the special meeting on the referendum, which took place immediately before last week's Village Board meeting.

According to Village President Chuck Lapicola, estimates offered by We Energies suggest burying the power lines along the road will cost between \$500,000 and \$1 million.

Assuming the worst-case scenario, Lapicola said the village would end up paying \$124,000 a year on a 10-year loan for the work. That would translate to 73 cents per \$1,000 of property valuation, or an additional \$146 a year in village taxes for a home valued at \$200,000.

"It really is just a guess what the work will actually cost, but this is the best guess we can come up with," he said.

"We Energies has been very difficult to pin down when asked for a cost estimate. It is a shame they seem to be able to charge whatever they want."

That cost does not include burying telephone and cable television lines, although officials said that expense is likely to be much lower.

If residents show interest in having the power lines removed from roadside poles, Lapicola said he was hopeful the village could work with the other utilities to take advantage of the road project to use an abandoned sewer line as a conduit for their service lines.

The greatest frustration, Lapicola said, is the prominent high-tension line which runs along the Fredonia Avenue right-of-way does not even provide electrical service within the village.

Another complicating factor, he said, is that Ozaukee County and not the village controls the right-of-way, because Fredonia Avenue is a county road also known as Highway H.

The utility line question could become moot, Lapicola said, if the road reconstruction does not happen.

He said the village is hoping to tap the same state Surface Transportation Program funding source as the Village of Belgium, which intends to reconstruct its Main Street. The county

Fredonia Ave. cost questions linger

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decides which project will receive the funding, that would cover 80% of the construction cost.

The county and municipality would split the remaining 20%, although the utility work would not be covered by the grant.

“Getting that 80% takes a huge bite out of the cost. It might not be a viable project without the state funding,” Lapicola said.

If the Fredonia Avenue reconstruction wins the county’s backing, it could dovetail well with the village’s financial picture.

Tentative plans call for engineering and planning work to be done this year, with construction deferred until 2013 at the earliest.

That timetable would allow the village to complete debt payments on the Fredonia Government Center, which come to about \$100,000 a year.

“Ideally, we would like to maintain the tax rate, rather than having taxes go up and down,” said Trustee Don Dohrwardt.

“That way nobody has any surprises when they get their tax bill. As one debt is paid off, another one is waiting to take its place.”

While the village would willingly pay its share of the road construction costs, officials have to decide if burying the utility lines is the best use of tax dollars.

“We need to look at this as one piece of the puzzle,” Lapicola said. “We don’t know what other needs will be coming up. Some roads definitely need attention, like North Wilson Street which just had a water main break.”

In addition to beautifying the road, he said burying the utility lines would make them less susceptible to problems caused by severe weather.

Village officials said they hoped to have more concrete cost figures when the next informational meeting is held, at 2 p.m. Saturday, March 17, at the Fredonia Government Center.

Specific road design details, however, will not be available until an engineering firm is hired to plan the reconstruction. Additional public hearings will be held at that point.