We Energies' plan to build east-side transmission towers approved despite objections from neighboring residents

We Energies' plan to construct an electrical substation to serve Grafton's east side cleared a major hurdle Monday when the Village Board unanimously approved annexation and rezoning requests for the project.

The board's action, which concurred with approvals given last week by the village's Plan Commission, paves the way for the utility to build the substation on the west end of a vacant 10-acre parcel at 695 Port Washington Rd.

We Energies officials said the substation is designed to reduce power outages, provide additional power capacity for the area and replace an obsolete substation.

In seeking approval, the utility worked with property owners to obtain an amendment to the village's land-use map, annex the 10-acre parcel from the Town of Grafton to the village and rezone three acres for the project from agricultural to institutional use.

The parcel is owned by Paul and Jill Christensen and Gale Clapper, who have agreed to sell land needed for the project to We Energies.

The utility plans to build a substation that will have four 52-foot transmission towers, a 70-foot lightning protection rod and a 15-foot electrical panel building. The equipment will be enclosed with an 8-foot security fence and screened from adjoining properties.

The Village Board and Plan Commission approvals came despite protests from several neighboring residents who said having a substation nearby would reduce the value of their properties, make the land more difficult to sell and raise possible health concerns associated with electrical transmissions.

"I feel that my property is useless because I can't sell it," Sharon Chrusniak, 671 Port Washington Rd., told the board.

"I'm going to be paying taxes on this land for the rest of my life."

Chrusniak asked the Village Board how she could get We Energies to compensate her for the loss of property value if the substation is built.

Village President Jim Brunnquell said residents would have work with the utility to resolve specific concerns about their properties. However, he said the project proposal was carefully reviewed by the Plan Commission this spring as well as last fall when it was first presented, and village officials agreed the substation is critically needed to meet the energy needs of area businesses and residences.

“The village has power needs and there is a significant need in the town, too,” Brunnquell said. “This is more of a regional need to provide power now and in the future.”

Village Planning Director Mike Rambousek said the utility has presented a project with a use that’s appropriate for the site and includes landscaping plans that meet municipal standards.

Landscaping plans call for two 4-foot-tall berms to be built on the north and south sides of the property and extend several hundred feet. Spruce trees and juniper shrubs will screen the building.

“At the staff level, we’ve reviewed it for several months, and all our requests have been met,” Rambousek told the board.

At last week’s Plan Commission meeting, Chrusniak and town residents William and Joan Grunwald, who live on River Bend Road, asked the utility to consider other sites for the project. But We Energies Projects Manager Kevin Kaari said the utility explored a number of other locations before choosing the site based on its proximity to transmission lines, minimal environmental impact and a willingness of the owners to sell at a reasonable price.

Commission members Alan Kletti and Carl Harms concurred with Brunnquell that the substation is needed, the utility researched its options and presented an acceptable plan.

The commission and Village Board approved an amendment to the village’s master land-use map for the project, which was also received a conditional-use permit and site-plan approval.

When We Energies first presented its plan last fall, the village amended the land-use map, but a claim of ownership for a small part of the parcel delayed the approval process for the project.