

Liberty: Without new lines, blackouts possible

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – While the president of Liberty Utilities said he didn't want to be an alarmist, he did say if power lines are not upgraded, brown outs or black outs in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee areas are possible.

"Even without any new growth I'm at the limit with 650," Mike Smart, president of the utility company, on Dec. 18 told the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.

Line 650 runs from Truckee to Kings Beach. The line is 60 kilovolts and a new one would be 120 kilovolts.

CalPeco, the parent company of Liberty Utilities, is proposing a three-phase upgrade to its loop of power lines that incorporate Truckee, Kings Beach, Tahoe City, Squaw Valley and points in between.

Line 625 from Kings Beach to Tahoe City would also become 120KV. Line 650 was originally built in 1959 and 625 in 1971.

Smart said electric use peaked Dec. 30, 2012, at 7pm at 144 megawatts. The previous peak was 124 megawatts on Jan. 9, 2011, at 5pm.

"It was alarming to have that load scenario last winter. We were on the edge and we could be again in the next few weeks," Smart said.

Working with NV Energy and using the diesel facilities at the Kings Beach substation allowed Liberty to avoid a system failure. Liberty buys its energy from NV, the former owner of the system. Liberty has about 49,000 customers on the California side of the basin, in Truckee and Alpine County.

An increase in electronic devices, bigger houses, growth outside the basin and resorts making more snow are contributing to the overload. The Christmas to New Year's time period is Liberty's highest demand for the entire year.

Some people who spoke Wednesday questioned why people in the Lake Tahoe Basin should be paying for the residential and commercial expansion in the Truckee area.

The estimated cost of the project is close to \$50 million. It could start next summer, with the first phase taking two years, and completion of the project in 2019.

Liberty per the California Public Utilities Commission is allowed to ask that agency for a rate increase to cover its expenses once the project or a phase of it is completed. The last rate increase was January 2012. Rate increases can occur every three years.

Dave McClure with the North Lake Tahoe Citizens Action Alliance called the electrical lines "a resort loop" because it allows Northstar and Squaw Valley to keep growing.

Laurel Ames with the Tahoe Area Sierra Club believes the upgrades will spur more growth.

Jim Bengochea, lead project engineer, told *Lake Tahoe News* the 120KV lines would provide enough power for what Northstar, Squaw Valley and Homewood would like to do in the future. He said these upgrades could be sufficient for the next 20 or 30 years.

But he stressed that the problem is the electric company doesn't have the capacity to carry the number of volts required to service customers today without a threat to the system at peak times, adding that the project has nothing to do with proposed future needs.

A concern brought up Wednesday is that the Tahoe City

substation relocation is not part of the environmental documents. This issue dominated discussion at the TRPA's Advisory Planning Commission this month, too.

Tahoe City is working on its area plan, which includes the relocation. Placer County documents also call for moving the substation from the 64-acre tract. It is feared that approval of the Liberty Utilities project could hamper efforts to move the substation in the future.

While this was not an action item for the board, members talked about possibly moving the lines farther into the forest for scenic reasons. However, 47,000 trees are already slated to be removed to put in the larger poles and bigger cables.

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Notes:

- Comments on the draft environmental documents are being taken until Jan. 7. The TRPA, CPUC and U.S. Forest Service are agencies putting out the documents. Wendy Jepson with TRPA is the point person – (775) 589.5269 or wjepson@trpa.org. More info is online.