

Power line law amendments due

BY ARCHIE MCLEAN, EDMONTON JOURNAL NOVEMBER 17, 2009

The province plans to introduce amendments to its controversial Bill 50 this week that will involve staging the construction of power lines over several years, government sources say.

The amendments are intended to spare consumers the shock of footing the roughly \$14.5-billion bill for construction costs up front, the sources say.

Details of the amendments are still unclear but Energy Minister Mel Knight said Monday transmission lines in southern Alberta are already being built in stages.

"They've approved the need. But you can see the pieces that are coming forward -it's already staged," Knight said.

He said those lines offer "a pretty good clue" as to what the government is planning.

Bill 50 was introduced in the spring and is expected to pass before the end of this session of the legislature. It was designed to streamline the approval process for new power lines by eliminating "needs" hearings.

The government says such new lines are vital to avoid blackouts or brownouts in the future. Alberta's Electric System Operator also supports building new lines.

But critics have said the bill puts too much power in the hands of cabinet and will lead to massive cost increases for consumers, who will pay for the upgrades.

Landowner activist Joe Anglin questioned whether the amendments will actually affect consumer costs and said the lines couldn't all be built at once in any case.

"With the government to come through with an amendment in staging, that probably would have happened anyway," Anglin said.

He called the transmission line issue increasingly politicized. "What they're doing is micromanaging and interfering with the board. They've made a farce of the entire process."

Ian Todd, a spokesman for Enmax, said he wants to see the amendments before commenting. But he said the government should put Alberta Utilities Commission hearings back into the process.

"Bottom line, we would like to see the regulator oversee this process," Todd said.

Bill 50 is expected to pass second reading today in the legislature. Any amendments will be introduced in the committee stage that follows.

With files from Trish Audette amclean@thejournal.canwest.com