

Legislators seek to stabilize county's cost of power

by **Matt Guardino**, Times Staff Writer

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CANTON - Legislators want to shield St. Lawrence County government from wild swings in the price of electricity.

Lawmakers have agreed to let Governmental Services Director Michael J. Cunningham seek proposals from companies other than Niagara Mohawk Power Corp.

They also gave Mr. Cunningham the green light to ask for an alternative bid from each firm that will include a 10 percent allocation of environmentally friendly power, such as from solar, wind or small hydroelectric facilities.

"It's something that I think many people are interested in, and if it's not going to increase the cost, I don't see why we wouldn't take that opportunity," said Legislator Tedra L. Cobb, D-Canton.

Mr. Cunningham said the county spends about \$400,000 a year on electricity for the buildings under his jurisdiction, which include all facilities except the Highway Department on Park Street and the Solid Waste Department.

Niagara Mohawk pulled out of the power generation business as part of statewide industry deregulation and the company has been moving from fixed rates to market pricing on the electricity it transmits.

"That makes budgeting very, very difficult, and it makes me have trouble sleeping at night," Mr. Cunningham said.

Recent rates have hovered around 5 cents to 7 cents per kilowatt hour, but there's no telling how high they could climb, he said.

Initially, the county will ask for one-year contracts for electricity - with two one-year extension options - even though longer-term agreements likely would be cheaper, Mr. Cunningham said.

That will give the county the flexibility to consider signing onto the energy services company that the county Chamber of Commerce is trying to promote.

Such firms can create savings by allowing larger customers to buy electricity in bulk on the open market under long-term contracts and can make it more cost-effective to purchase power from renewable sources.

"It's good to think of the county as supporting local businesses and local business opportunities, and an energy services company is certainly one of those," Ms. Cobb said.

Last summer, more than 150 local residents sent handwritten letters asking the county to consider buying green power as part of a statewide initiative spearheaded by a group called Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

A 2001 executive order from Gov. George E. Pataki requires state agencies to get 10 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2005 and 20 percent by 2020.

Local governments are not bound by the order, but Mr. Cunningham said he used the 10 percent mark as a guideline for a possible green power purchase by the county.

Advocates say improved technology is causing the price of environmentally friendly power to fall quickly compared to the cost of energy from fuels like coal and oil.

They say the conversion to green power will cut harmful emissions that lead to acid rain and health problems and will improve national security by reducing dependence on foreign sources of oil. The changeover will come more quickly if governments take the lead, environmentalists say.

But Legislature Vice Chairman Thomas A. Nichols, R-Ogdensburg, bristled at the possibility of spending more money just to appear "politically correct."

"As far as I'm concerned, the taxpayers want the lights on, and I don't think the taxpayers are concerned whether it's green energy or not," he said. "They want the lowest cost possible."

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