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My turn: Time to turn on the power

With energy being a hot topic this election season it's time for Alaska voters to turn up the heat on elected officials

It's election season. Voting Alaskans are turning on the power. The major power plan for Alaska is a natural gas pipeline to the Lower 48. Politicians who block or delay that project - and some appear bent on doing it for political reasons - will suffer the power of constituents at the ballot box on Aug. 22 and Nov. 7.

Development of power for in-state use also a subject in political debates. In Southcentral Alaska, a group of power cooperatives are angry at the governor for vetoing the appropriation to them of the final \$73 million in the old railbelt fund. The governor was right in his action because all the utilities would do is use the money to continue battling each other. He did leave them \$800,000, which they should use to come up with a regional plan for power generation and distribution.

Part of the problem in Southcentral Alaska is that the cost of natural gas used to generate electricity is climbing and gas supplies are dwindling. The price is dictated in worldwide markets - good for the future of Alaska's natural gas pipeline, but not good for electric ratepayers in Southcentral Alaska. What's needed, a power expert tells us, is a large coal-fired plant to generate electricity for the feuding utilities.

Alaska holds 50 percent of the nation's coal reserves, and although 80 percent of those reserves are in the National Petroleum Reserve, there is plenty of coal in Southcentral Alaska. In the meantime, those utilities are mounting an anti-Murkowski campaign as though someone else can solve the problems they refuse to solve among themselves.

Things are better in Southeast Alaska, thanks partly to the 48-year-old

Southeastern Conference, which holds communities together and has developed a long-term plan for a Southeast Alaska power grid. The area needs money to complete the Swan Lake-Tyee Lake Intertie, the first phase of the Southeast Alaska grid.

The project is gaining support because of the political season. And instead of mounting a campaign against the governor, Southeast Alaska power managers are working with him. Of course, it helps that his competition has pledged to complete the intertie, which stalled after an expenditure of \$56.6 million. It will take another \$50 million to complete.

There are charges of mismanagement in the expenditure of the initial amount of money. The greatest mismanagement was allowing environmental organizations, especially the Tongass Conservation Society, to dictate to the Forest Service where to designate the power line right-of-way. It was set up the mountain side, making road building impossible and requiring helicopter logging and construction.

The conservation society opposed any route that also could be used as a road right-of-way. Too bad for Ketchikan and Wrangell. They would at least by now have a pioneer road toward Bradfield Canal and eventually hook up with British Columbia Highway 37 and access to the Lower 48.

But dwelling on that doesn't solve the intertie problem. What the intertie needs is money and the area's residents are justified in asking the state for the funds. When the project was owned by the people of Ketchikan, the borough put \$5 million into it from its timber disaster funds. After the project became part of the four-dam pool, the pool ratepayers put \$15 million into the project. The rest of the \$56.6 million were federal funds. The state has not contributed. It should and all of the gubernatorial candidates agree.

Federal participation was pushed after Frank Murkowski, then a U.S. senator, succeeded in having Congress approve a Southeast Alaska power grid. Murkowski gave the grid another push last Monday when, as governor, he appointed a steering committee to examine the financial feasibility of completing the intertie and connecting with B.C. Hydro in order to market surplus Alaska power to Canada and the Lower 48.

As explained to this writer, hydro electric plants such as Swan Lake, Tyee lake, the proposed Thomas Bay project and the recently suggested tidal generation plants in Alaska, are like gas stations in the highway system. They provide the power but the interties, like the

highways, are a public responsibility. Also, in the case of the Swan Lake-Tyee Intertie, Ketchikan needs the power from Tyee. But existence of the intertie, when tied to British Columbia, encourages more "gas stations" to appear, such as Mahoney Lake, to generate more power to sell.

A problem for Southeast Alaska is that Tyee Lake and Swan Lake are part of the four-dam pool, which also operates power plants at Kodiak and Solomon Gulch (Valdez). Kodiak wants to break up the pool. It offers to assume the pool's \$65 million debt. The problem is that it also wants the \$25 million in reserves the pool holds as insurance for the system. Wrangell, Petersburg and Ketchikan could operate well as a two-dam pool, but not without some reserves to ensure against the constant maintenance and repairs required in the system.

If Southeast Alaska ended with a two-dam pool, that could be expanded (and the name changed) to take in the KWETICO Cooperative's line going from Juneau to Greens Creek and Hoonah. It could include the Inside Passage Cooperative line and probably others and have a true Southeast Alaska transmission system, reducing the power rate for places such as Kake from 52 cents per kilowatt hour to closer to the 6.8 cents wholesale rate paid by Ketchikan. Like a new highway, that would attract new "gas stations," to generate power to be sold to the continental power grid.

Fifty-two cents per kilowatt hour? No wonder Alaskans are turning up the power on their elected officials.

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