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Proposal for power plants raises a host of troublesome questions

Winter makes it tempting to endorse a couple of new coal-fired electric plants in the Missouri River bottoms northwest of Weston.

There's nothing like icy wind to make a person appreciate fire.

Once, I gazed through a little glass window into a burner at the Iatan Power Plant, the one already operational in the same area as the two proposed plants. Intense flame, enormous power — they're both alluring.

But when it comes to adding two plants near the same site, there also are some huge questions.

What would be the environmental impacts regarding chemicals? How would more plants and their accompanying cloud-touching smokestacks affect the rural landscape, and thus, property values? Are these plants really needed?

Great Plains Energy Inc. officials say there will be a need in the future. The parent company of Kansas City Power & Light Co. maintains that by the time the plants can be licensed and built years from now, regional growth will absorb the additional power.

The company proposes to build one plant in Platte County near the Iatan plant, and another plant across the Missouri River in Atchison County, Kansas.

But one wonders, is the power really needed here or would the company like to stick a plant on our turf to sell power elsewhere across the nation? Perhaps it's easier in the job-hungry Midwest, where land is cheaper and acid rain hasn't yet scarred the trees, to get a power plant built and licensed, so profit can be reaped by selling power in the East.

Of course the Northland's power appetite isn't diminishing. Growth brings more commercial users and home wall sockets every week.

No one is going to accuse us of being thrifty, either. Drive the highways at night, and it's obvious that every business sign and sometimes the building interiors remain lit up in blazing glory as ongoing advertising.

Fact is, we waste incredible amounts of electricity. As a society, we must decide if we want to find a way to trim the lamps. Otherwise, we'll always face proposals for new power plants.

But I'm skeptical that the Northland needs these two new plants in this location.



I suspect the issue is that with the Bush administration's anti-environmental, pro-energy business crusade, a power company wants to get the approvals to build now under friendly supervision.

Platte County commissioners have approved an economic development package for plant on the Missouri side.

Economic development and tax-base building are powerful benefits.

But it's not like the county is hurting for either right now.

So, it looks like people who enjoy the Northland's countryside and the generally green-friendly subdivisions are about to get a couple of new smokestacks rammed in as neighbors.

A key issue for many opponents is emissions. There are all manner of arguments about how safe coal plants are for the environment. But neighbors watching the current plant operate would prefer not to have a triple dose.

Some officials have said they're sure the plants will meet federal and state emission regulations, so no problem.

But what comes out of the plant can meet regulations and still add to overall environmental problems for the general public. Current rules are about hazard reduction, not elimination. Having three waste-belching stacks relatively close together is not going to make anyone breathe easier.

And we are talking about monstrously big smokestacks. You can see the Iatan chimney on a winter day at Platte City, 10 miles away, sticking above the horizon.

Once I turkey hunted about five miles from the Iatan plant. It was a hazy morning, and that haze carried the light. Although I was in a valley, the blinking lights from the Iatan smokestack lit up the countryside like a neon bar sign. On a sunny day, the stack loomed over the horizon out the front door of my friend's antebellum home.

Three of these would really light up the countryside at night.

A public hearing was recently held to discuss a landfill at a new plant.

I can remember the Iatan plant being shut down during the 1993 floods because the bottom floors were full of water. The plant is built on low ground on a river bend. Before that, the river would flow over the bend as a flood outlet. It's always going to try to cut that way. Development probably should never have been allowed on that bend.

Jobs and electrical power, some people will prefer them any day.

But there are many who do not, and their voices need to be heard loud and clear.

Because for most Northland residents, the greatest economic value in the long run will be from preserving environmental and aesthetic qualities in every way possible.

To reach Bill Graham, Northland columnist, call **(816) 234-5906** or send e-mail to

bgraham@kcstar.com.