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Energy and Utilities Committee

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Joint Committee on Audit  
State Building Commission



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**Cowles: Wisconsin's Energy Infrastructure Must Be Bolstered**

Last week's unprecedented power failure serves as a stern warning to Wisconsin residents. The blackout shut down several states in the Northeast, the Midwest and in areas of Canada. While we don't know the exact cause of the blackout, and we might never be sure, one thing is certain: Wisconsin's energy infrastructure must be expanded.

"We cannot afford to have this happen here in Wisconsin," said Senator Rob Cowles, Chair of the State Senate Utilities Committee. "Not only would it cripple our economy from manufacturers to biotechnology industries, it would have a devastating impact on our most vulnerable citizens. The sick, the elderly and the disabled are dependent on a reliable power supply."

The State of Wisconsin did not suffer any major power outages last week. However, in Sheboygan a medium-sized power plant tripped off line. Fortunately, power was soon restored and the rest of the power grid was able to meet demand.

State officials have been meeting to discuss the issue, and Governor Doyle has asked Chairperson Bridge of the Public Service Commission (PSC) to produce a report on lessons learned from the Northeast power outage. Earlier today, Governor Doyle signed an Executive Order that directs the PSC and the Department of Natural Resources to work together in order to streamline and coordinate permitting for the Wisconsin's transmission infrastructure.

Senator Cowles said, "I am pleased with Governor Doyle's actions on this matter and I will work with him and the Legislature to address our energy infrastructure." In fact, Senator Cowles and Representative Jensen received a letter in May from Secretary Hassett and Chairperson Bridge stating their commitment to providing a streamlined permitting and siting process that bolsters our infrastructure yet protects the environment.

Senator Cowles has been pleased with progress with new construction in recent years, but is concerned that our power supply is still vulnerable. "New laws passed by the Legislature in recent years has helped beef up our infrastructure, but there is still much work to be done."

In this legislative session, two new bills authored by Senator Cowles were recently signed into law. "One law created greater incentives for communities to host power plants. The other granted the American Transmission Company the ability to leave the Midwest Independent System Operator (MISO) if the Public Service Commission decided it would be in Wisconsin's best interest. These provisions will strengthen our power supply and protect ratepayers."

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There is still a lot of infrastructure that must get built in order to keep up with existing and expected energy demands. The State of Wisconsin 2001 Energy Policy reported we must install 6,300 megawatts of new power capacity in Wisconsin by 2016. This is the equivalent of at least a dozen large power plants, even with conservation measures taken into account. In addition, the American Transmission Company has invested hundreds of millions in infrastructure in recent years, and plans to invest over a billion in transmission infrastructure over the decade.

“In addition to transmission siting, other legislation will be part of the energy agenda this fall. Legislation such as an energy impact statement, where officials are notified if a proposed rule or laws will have an effect on energy reliability will be up for consideration. We should also create greater protections for keeping our energy infrastructure safe and secure. Finally, we must also take steps to further protect our state’s conservation and efficiency programs in order to decrease our energy demands.”