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## Use new impact fees to aid environment

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As Wisconsin's power grid receives a much-needed upgrade, counties and municipalities will be due environmental impact fees for the construction of power lines across their land. But the first case of a county deciding how to use its fee payment has raised a red flag.

The Columbia County Board last month voted to use more than \$300,000 in impact fees, not on the environment, but on a software upgrade for two county offices.

The board's decision violates the Legislature's intent in mandating the fee payments for "park, conservancy, wetland or other similar environmental programs." The board should reconsider its vote. Failing that, the state Public Service Commission should reject the county's plan. With far more power line impact fees to be paid over the coming years, Wisconsin should establish a clear standard for the use of the money to improve the environment, not to supplement governments' regular budgets.

At stake is a state law requiring the American Transmission Co. to pay fees to local governments for the privilege of constructing power lines. ATC is paying Columbia County \$327,000 for its share of an upgrade of 17.4 miles of transmission line. Dane County is to receive a smaller payment from the same project.

While the law expects the money to be used for environmental programs, it permits the state PSC to approve other uses "in the public interest." It's the "public interest" clause that Columbia County expects to justify the use of the money for a software upgrade for its Land Information and Register of Deeds departments.

Diverting an environmental impact fee to pay for departmental software sets a bad precedent. Stick to the intent of the law: Use the impact fees to benefit the environment.

[Return to story](#)

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