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Hot Alternative

Group would burn dead pinons to heat downtown

By JULIE ANN GRIMM | The New Mexican

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Mounds of chipped pinon trees sit at the Caja del Rio Landfill in Santa Fe. - Steve Babuljak | The New Mexican

Fire and wood have been used by humankind since early civilization, but only in the last 30 years have people fully harnessed the energy created when flame meets flora.

Now a team of Austrian engineers and a few Santa Feans with a vision are working to bring super efficient power to downtown by building a system that would burn wood to replace gas-fired heaters.

It might sound like a glorified wood stove, but it's really a high-tech alternative to the skyrocketing cost of natural gas. Proponents of the project say users of the system won't see or smell carbon-smoke and will keep the money spent on energy in the local economy.

In addition to planning a boiler house and a network of hot-water pipes that could serve major downtown buildings, the engineers are eyeing the city-owned Santa Fe rail yard as a possible place to demonstrate how the technology can work on a smaller scale.

The generators that incinerate wood without producing smoke and charcoal are widely used in Europe to heat homes with hot water and sometimes provide electricity, but few communities in the United States have invested in the concept.

If you ask Mark Sardella, it's high time they do.

Sardella is an energy expert who is spearheading the effort to bring the so-called biomass-district-energy

system to Santa Fe. His plan involves using the area's abundance of wood to heat water in a closed pipeline loop that would warm buildings. It puts to use the thousands of tons of piñon lost in the drought as well as the future cullings from millions of acres of public land that will be thinned by government contractors in the coming years.

Smoke hung thick over the city this fall when contractors burned trees removed from the Santa Fe watershed. If a biomass generator were being used, the trees would be warming hotels and office buildings instead of blurring the air, Sardella said.

Using a grant for \$1.3 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Sardella's nonprofit Local Energy hired an Austrian firm that made using waste wood for energy an economically and environmentally viable reality in central Europe.

Four engineers from BIOS Bioenergiesysteme are visiting the city this week. Two of the men from Gratz, the same hometown as California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, will stay here for five months gathering information to design a biomass energy system for Santa Fe.

A year from now, the group aims to have complete plans for the system.

"This has happened in our country," said Ingwald Obernberger, the company's general manager. "There are places where in the winter you saw a dust cloud going over the town. And after going to district energy, one year later, it's gone."

Both City Council and Santa Fe County Commission have passed resolutions backing the Local Energy project, and Sardella counts many downtown businesses among his allies, including major hotels that already use water-based heating systems. The initial USDA grant will fund the plans, and the nonprofit is asking for another grant to pay some of the costs of the actual system.

Plans to involve the rail yard in the project seemed to be well received by developers who met the engineers Thursday. Trenches for new sewer and electric lines are expected to be dug this summer, and if Local Energy gets the funding together, it would be able to lay pipes for the energy system at the same time.

"This fits exactly with the mission that we have," said Steven Robinson, president of the Santa Fe Railyard Community Corp. Board of Directors. The city hired the corporation to redevelop the 50-acre downtown parcel as a community asset.

Robinson said the project seems to be a good idea for the rail yard because it is a long-term investment that would benefit the people of the area and innovatively use the available resources.

Sardella said money is rapidly escaping from the community in the form of gas bills paid to Public Service Company of New Mexico, an investor-owned company. With the biomass system, local people could make a living by harvesting and transporting the wood, he said.

Engineers said the system could be designed to mostly run on solar power in the summer and only burn

biomass in the fall and winter, when peak demand for heat exists. The system could also power other heat-using machines such as kilns.

For one rail-yard tenant, that idea is promising.

Avra Leodas, the owner of Santa Fe Clay, said she doesn't know enough about the biomass project to endorse it, but likes the idea of saving money on twice-weekly kiln firings and heating her studio.

"In general, alternative energy is always a very welcome thought," she said.

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