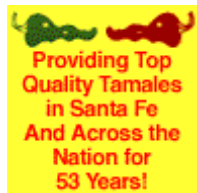


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Tuesday, September 7, 2004

SFCC Is Biomass Heating Hopeful

By Adam Rankin

Journal Staff Writer

The Santa Fe Community College wants to make itself into a community-based, sustainable energy hub that will use the state's overgrown forests to heat its buildings, revitalize the land and create opportunities for rural jobs and training.

Community college president Jim McLaughlin said switching to biomass heat "is one of the most significant steps we can take to align our operations and educational programs with our renewable energy initiatives."

"Our goal is to become a laboratory for learning about renewable energy options and to provide training as well as hands-on experience for practitioners and our students," he said.

Of seven potential district heating systems evaluated by a team of Austrian engineers in the Santa Fe area this summer, the community college showed the highest efficiency rate and was most economically viable.

"They said that there is no question, if we had these numbers (in Europe) we would begin construction immediately," Mark Sardella, founder

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of the Santa Fe-based non-profit Local Energy, said of the engineers response to the community college's biomass energy potential.

He said converting the community college to biomass would cost under \$2 million.

In 2003, Local Energy won a \$1.28 million, Department of Agriculture grant to study the possibility of building a heating system that would pipe steam throughout a self-contained infrastructure, designed to heat Santa Fe with the overgrown wood culled sustainably from nearby forests. Local Energy's proposal was one of only 19 projects out of more than 400 to be selected for funding.

The funding paid for a feasibility and engineering study of building such a system in seven Santa Fe districts, including the community college, the College of Santa Fe, the downtown area, the Railyard, the South Capital Complex state office buildings on St. Francis Drive and the apartment complex Los Arroyos.

The forests around Santa Fe in a 50-mile radius produce more than twice the amount of fuel all seven districts would need to operate, Sardella said.

"Utilization of biomass can be part of a holistic effort at soil restoration and water conservation and that is what we hope to achieve," he said.

The engineering studies have shown that all of the potential areas evaluated for a district steam heating system are technically feasible and viable, Sardella said.

But he said the community college showed the best potential, based on an estimated measure of energy sold per length of pipe, measured as kilowatts per meter. Sardella said that in Europe anything above 1,500 kw/meter is considered economically viable, whereas the community college rated 8,000 kw/meter.

"(The engineers) were very pleased with the results," he said.

In addition to being more efficient, the biomass steam system also cuts down on emissions of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide.

Sardella said the engineering study suggests the community college could reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by more than

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92 percent by switching from a natural gas system to a biomass steam system.

The next step of the project is to do a detailed economic analysis of a biomass system. Sardella said past studies have shown that between 70 percent and 90 percent of dollars spent on energy leave the community. He said a biomass project should help keep energy dollars local, to what extent will be determined by the studies.



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