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LOCAL ENERGY, a Santa Fe-based nonprofit dedicated to the research and development of sustainable local energy sources and systems, has entered into an agreement with BIOS Bioenergiesysteme GmbH to design a high-efficiency, biomass-fueled heating system that can provide low-cost heat to downtown businesses and homes.

The contract with BIOS, an internationally acclaimed engineering company specializing in the research, development, and design of biomass-fired heating and energy plants, is the first step in the implementation of a $1.8 million study undertaken by Local Energy to assess the feasibility and economic impact of an environmentally friendly district energy heating system fueled by biomass in the form of forest waste. The study is funded primarily by a $1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in cooperation with the Department of Energy, and is expected to be completed within 18 months.

The award-winning company is headquartered in Graz, Austria, and has designed and/or consulted on more than 500 biomass district heating systems around the world, using state-of-the-art knowledge and training. It works in collaboration with the Institute of Chemical Engineering Fundamentals and Plant Engineering at Graz University of Technology. Its director, Dr. Ingwald Obernberger, is also a scientific advisor to the European Commission's biomass and waste group, and is the Austrian representative for the International Energy Agency's Integrated Bioenergy Systems task force. He recently engineered a biomass-fired plant that is considered the most technologically advanced such plant in Austria, having won the prestigious Energy Globe Award out of a field of more than 1,000 entries from nearly 100 countries.

The Santa Fe system will be designed to lower heating costs significantly for local businesses and homes while reducing harmful emissions, making use of forest waste products, and establishing a renewable, local source of energy that will free the community from ever-increasing heating costs and unreliable, non-local fuel supplies.