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City weighs biomass power

By Jenny Lancour

POSTED: January 10, 2008

ESCANABA — Biomass continues to be considered as a potential energy source at Escanaba's power plant, according to the city's Electrical Advisory Committee (EAC) which discussed the option Wednesday.

During its regular meeting, the EAC agreed with Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski to recommend to city council to keep exploring the possibility of converting part of its power plant to burn biomass, such as wood chips, to make energy.

For the past several years, the city has been looking at how to meet increased energy needs as it continues to produce electricity at its existing coal-fired plant put into operation June 1, 1958.

After Plan A — to consider building a new power plant — no longer became an option, the city has been looking at Plan B — to buy some or all of its power wholesale and convert part of the plant to biomass, said Furmanski.

Four companies recently submitted power purchase proposals to the city: Wisconsin Public Power Inc. (WPPI); WeEnergies; Wisconsin Public Service (WPS); and the Upper Peninsula Power Co. (UPPCO), a subsidiary of WPS, which operates the existing plant.

After eliminating UPPCO's proposal over WPS's, three companies remained.

Two of these companies, the lowest bidders, expressed interest in part of the plant being converted to biomass, Furmanski said.

He declined to name them because proposals were submitted confidentially.

Though producing power using biomass would be more expensive than using coal, Escanaba would not burn biomass for its own energy needs, but sell the renewable energy to others, Furmanski said. He expects by 2015 that Michigan energy suppliers will be required to sell a certain percentage of renewable energy.

In Wisconsin, 10 percent of energy consumed is mandated to be generated from renewable sources.

If council approves the EAC recommendation, the city will approach the two parties to further explore costs involved with their power purchase proposals and the biomass option, Furmanski said.

At its Jan. 17 meeting next week, council will consider the EAC recommendation for officials to continue looking into the biomass option.

In other action Wednesday, the EAC approved an agreement for the city to sell power to UPPCO, basically formalizing the long-standing sale of power between the two parties, Furmanski said. The EAC also agreed to purchase an existing transformer from UPPCO for \$34,000.

Article Photos



Escanaba officials continue to look into converting part of the city's power plant to biomass. The Electric Advisory Committee decided at its meeting Wednesday to seek council's approval to further explore power purchase proposals from two companies also interested in biomass as a renewable energy source. (Daily Press photo by Jenny Lancour)

Fact Box

What's next?

The Electric Advisory Committee's recommendation — to continue exploring the use of biomass to produce energy at the existing power plant — will be considered by city council at its Jan. 17 meeting at 7 p.m. at city hall.

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