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## **Esky: It's easy going green?**

By Jenny Lancour - [jlancour@dailypress.net](mailto:jlancour@dailypress.net)

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ESCANABA — Escanaba could be a leader in the bio-based economics field, not only in the state, but in the nation. That's what members of the Electric Advisory Committee (EAC) were told at their meeting Wednesday.

"You really do have an opportunity here...a real opportunity to do something different that's new in the development of bio-based economics in the United States," said Ray Miller, research forester and manager of the U.P. Tree Improvement Center at Michigan State University's office in Escanaba.

The city is looking into possibly converting its coal-fired electric plant into a biomass-fueled facility while also purchasing energy wholesale from a power supplier. Local officials have been looking into both ideas as they explore ways to meet increasing energy needs in the city. Also, the city has been told it can buy power cheaper than it can make it.

Escanaba could be the first bio-economic development center in the nation, attracting grant monies from those who want to be a part of the endeavor, Miller said. When you're the first, you then have knowledge to sell to the second company that develops, he added.

The subject was addressed at the meeting when members commented on a recent conference at Bay College regarding alternative energy programs in Sweden. More than half of all heat in that country is from biomass.

Miller said MSU is working with Michigan Technological University to collect information from company's and landowners to advance rural development activities and bio-based economics in the state. The two universities have been working with Swedish companies toward this goal.

"The Swedish approach the problem in a multi-discipline way," Miller said, explaining the Swedes work with universities and companies to form a coalition, building on each party's resources for efficiency and cost reductions.

Escanaba is being looked at as a prime site for a producer of alternative energy for several reasons, Miller said. City officials are currently looking into options for using the power plant including burning biomass as fuel for energy. One of the largest landowners of forest land in the state, Plum Creek, is located here. NewPage paper mill is also active in pursuing innovative biofuel alternatives with Chemrec, an alternative energy company based in Sweden, he added.

Escanaba Councilman Gilbert Cheves said the city and the community are being pro-active in looking into biofuels as an alternative energy source.

"We are really ahead of what's happening in the state," Cheves told EAC members, adding city administrators are working on going green. "We want to become a leader in this field...(and) be first in line for funding."

In other business, Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski said he's hopeful to receive, within a week or two, biomass proposals from two energy suppliers who have already submitted power purchase proposals to the city. The two biomass proposals were expected to be presented at Wednesday's meeting but the companies needed more time to complete their work, Furmanski said. EAC members took action to request the companies give a firm date to present their proposals if information will not be complete before the committee's next meeting April 9. Furmanski heeded members that giving a deadline could mean losing out on a proposal.

Furmanski also said the city needs to address improving efficiency at the existing power plant. The facility is turning 50 years old this year.

Committee members expressed concern for bringing a power plant proposal to voters this year. Cheves said the state requires any ballot proposal be announced at least 14 weeks before an election date.

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