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City council probes power plant options

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ESCANABA — City officials continue to encourage public input on Escanaba's electric options as the narrowing process continues. Council agreed Thursday not to pursue another idea due to costs.

Because of an aging 50-year-old power plant, officials are exploring ways to meet future energy demands for its customers, both residential and industrial.

At Thursday's meeting, council members agreed with the Electrical Advisory Committee's recommendation to not proceed with a study on converting the local plant to use Powder River Basin (PRB) coal.

Officials were considering converting the plant to the different type fuel because PRB coal costs less than the Eastern coal the plant typically burns. The facility is currently burning a Western coal after the Eastern coal became unavailable. The Western coal is more expensive than the PRB coal.

The EAC decided last week to recommend to not go ahead with the \$125,000 conversion study following a report on the PRB coal presented by Electrical Superintendent Mike Furmanski.

Even with the best-case scenario using PRB coal, it would cost the city about \$2 million more compared to buying power wholesale, Furmanski told council. In addition, it would cost \$20-\$30 million to convert the plant to use PRB coal, he estimated.

As other energy options continue to be explored, Furmanski plans to present a report on biomass fuel when the EAC meets at 6 p.m. July 9 at city hall.

Instead of laying several energy options on the table for the EAC to review all at once, ideas are being considered separately, he explained.

So far officials have decided against building a new plant, using wind energy and gasification. Officials continue to consider improving the facility's efficiency, converting the plant to burn biomass fuel, and purchasing energy wholesale.

A town hall meeting on the electric supply issue will take place at the EAC's Aug. 13 meeting, said City Manager Jim O'Toole. He is encouraging the public to attend.

"We're getting to the point where a decision will be made soon," he said Thursday.

Council unanimously agreed to not proceed with the PRB conversion study.

In other action, council agreed to amend the appropriations ordinance to balance the 2007-08 budget.

Council accepted a gift of \$6,000 from the Hannahville Indian Community to go towards the cost of a new police dog. O'Toole said the dog has been selected and will be trained for both bomb-detection and tracking purposes.

Article Photos



Mike Furmanski

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