



One county's trash, Koochiching to study gasification project

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Koochiching County commissioners unanimously agreed Tuesday to move forward with studies to determine the viability a plasma gasification facility to process garbage and timber slash in International Falls.

The facility, which would be called the Renewable Energy Clean Air Product, would "gasify" waste at very high temperature and therefore release very few emissions into the air without actual burning. The process would generate byproducts such as hydrogen, ethanol, biodiesel, vitrified glass, rock wool and other materials.

The county would own the facility, which would be located in International Falls.

Board Chairman Mike Hanson has taken the lead on the project. He asked the board to consider the proposal's potential.

Hanson said the project would bring both environmental and economic benefits to the area. The facility could reduce the \$1 million annual bill the county pays to dispose of its solid waste in a landfill in Kittson County as well as end the need to landfill garbage generated by Koochiching County residents.

The facility would have 15 job positions, which will require a level of education and certification to operate the plant. Hanson said training courses for workers at the facility could be developed at Rainy River Community College, which would create a market for workers using the new technology.

Byproducts created at the facility could also be sold, he added.

Hanson described a unique partnership between county, state and federal agencies as well as private organizations that would occur should the project move forward.

During the meeting he introduced John D. Howard III, of Distributed Generation Solutions of Mendota Heights, which would handle the technical aspects of the proposal, and Steve Korstad of Korridor Capital Advisors of St. Paul, which would handle the financing options.

Howard explained the proposal, which uses complex technology, simply: "We would take trash destined for a landfill and end up with valuable products."

A video of a similar facility in Yoshi, Japan, offered commissioners additional information on the technology and its options for use.

"This is not burning," Howard said. "Gasification takes place in an oxygen deprived environment.

Gasification is more efficient and better performs leaving less emissions."

Korstad explained that financing for the facility could come from grants, loans and loan guarantees from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, he noted that the county has sought money for the project from the state's 2006 bonding bill. Korstad's company would help the county with municipal lease financing, an alternative to bonds, in which the facility is purchased in installments, which are tax exempt, with no money down and a \$1 buyout.

Paul Nevanen, Koochiching Economic Development Authority director, noted that no other facilities exist now in North America.

Howard added that four projects in the U.S. are now "on the table" and the Falls facility would be No. 3 or 4.

Nevanen was joined at Tuesday's meeting by representatives of Minnesota Power and members of the Laurentian Resource Conservation and Development and other RC&Ds from northern Minnesota. Laurentian's mission is to develop and promote economic and natural resources through cooperative efforts. It brought the technology to the board in a presentation last year.

Howard said he would investigate the needs of the county and region, as well as determine the availability of feedstock in the region, and report back to the board. He is also expected to bring information to the board about who would use the byproducts of the plant.

Commissioner Wade Pavleck said he would support researching the proposal, but was reluctant to jump in fully.

"When you look at a project like this, you're either on the cutting edge or the Guinea pig," he told the board. "The first can be a big advantage or disadvantage -- that remains to be determined."

He reminded the board that technology such as incineration, once pushed by the state, was later found to be a financial and environmental liability for counties.

In other business, the board:

* Accepted a letter during public comment from Pete Kalar, representing the members of Law Enforcement Labor Services Local 102, opposing appointment of anyone from outside the sheriff's department to fill out the remainder of retiring Sheriff Duane Nelson's term.

* Agreed to pay \$7,338 for July child support and commitment services provided to the county by attorney Lyndon Larsen. The board took no action on a request for additional money to contract for legal services by County Attorney Jennifer Hasbargen, who was absent from the meeting because she was ill. The board indicated they would consider Hasbargen's request while discussing the 2006 budget.

* Met in closed session with Minnesota Counties Insurance Trust attorney Ann Goering and claims representative John Stein to discuss a suit against the county, Sheriff Duane Nelson and Capt. John Mastin by Florence Hervey, jail administrator. No action was taken.

