
Tire plant talks roll along

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Erie community leaders might get an up-close look at a tires-to-energy plant in action before long.

At the very least, the community should soon be able to learn about the track record of the type of plant that Erie Renewable Energy wants to build on 65 acres of former International Paper Co. property along East Lake Road.

Company officials and consultants said Tuesday that the company is in the final stage of negotiations with a vendor that will supply the so-called fluidized bed technology that is the critical element of the \$150 million plant they propose in east Erie.

The officials made this prediction to about 50 members of the Manufacturers' Association of Northwest Pennsylvania.

"We have looked around the world for the best suppliers," said Boston-based project manager Vic Gatto. "And we have found suppliers who are actually doing tire-derived fluidized bed plants now."

Gatto said he hopes to complete the deal with the vendor sometime this month, and said a contingent from Erie will be invited along with regulators to look at plants that use the technology.

"We want to have people from the community also come with us and take a look at these plants," said Gatto, a partner in Erie Renewable Energy's parent company, Caletta Renewable Energy.

There are no plants in the United States exactly like the one Erie Renewable Energy plans, but Gatto confirmed that the vendor now in negotiations has supplied technology for two plants in Japan.

Gatto, along with Erie real estate developer and local project coordinator Greg Rubino and environmental consultant Joe Pezze, laid out the plans for the waste-tire-to-energy plant Tuesday at an informational breakfast session at the Manufacturers' Association's West 38th Street headquarters.

And the controversy that the project has generated followed along.

A handful of protesters carrying signs urging "No Tire Plant" stood in the rain at the association's front gate to greet attendees. A representative of the opposition group Keep Erie's Environment Protected attended the session.

Once inside, Erie Renewable Energy officials found an attentive and receptive audience.

The association's marketing director, Tammy Polanski, said the issue was an important one.

Affordable power, she said, "is one of the biggest obstacles facing business today. We are all looking at ways to keep our costs down."

Gatto officials detailed plans for the plant they said would provide 60 good jobs, business to local suppliers, and 9 megawatts of power to a power company or large local power users. They said the plant would use the best technology available, would not produce odors, not damage Presque Isle or Lake Erie, and would not spew dust.

Pezze said he believes the plant will have no adverse impact on public health.

Pezze, an independent consultant, worked for the state Department of Environmental Protection on air quality issues for 25 years and was air quality manager for southwestern Pennsylvania for 16 of those.

Pezze explained to the group the air-pollution control technology that he said will eliminate 99.9 percent of particulate emissions.

K.E.E.P. representative Randy Barnes, of Harborcreek, who attended the session, said he heard nothing to ease his concerns.. "They really didn't say anything that we haven't heard before," Barnes said.

Barnes described the technology as unproven, and the long-term health effects as an unknown. "It's a big experiment is what it is, and it's an experiment that shouldn't be done in an urban area."

But Erie businessman Carl Steiner said he believes the fluidized bed technology exists today to do just what ERE promises.

"I think it is very workable," said Steiner, chief executive of TM Industrial Supply Inc. of Erie, a company that makes equipment for a variety of industrial, power generation and water treatment markets.

But Steiner said he wants to see more details of the technology that ERE plans to use before passing judgment on this plant.

Gatto said those details will be available when ERE files its air quality permit an application, a step still expected by Dec. 1.

DEP is expected to take at least 10 months to study the application, and approval would be followed by a review by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Gatto has said it would take three years to get permits, design and build the plant. If all goes as planned, the plant could be up and running by the third quarter of 2010.

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