
Tire plant: You'll like us.

Published 08/16/2007

Sponsors of a proposed \$150 million tires-to-energy plant Wednesday promised their project will be an economic blessing and not an environmental curse.

Officials of Erie Renewable Energy LLC said the plant will not bring soot, smells or pollution back to Erie's lower east side.

Instead, they predicted their plant will prove to be a good deal for east Erie -- that it will create 60 well-paying jobs, promote clean development of the former International Paper site, and supply 90 megawatts of electricity at a bargain-basement price.

"We really have a commitment to bring good, sensible power generation to the community," project manager Vic Gatto told members of the Erie Times-News Editorial Board on Wednesday.

Gatto, a one-time college football coach and professor, is a partner in Boston-based Caletta Renewable Energy, one of the parent companies of Erie Renewable Energy.

Gatto and two local sponsors -- real estate broker Greg Rubino and construction company President Owen McCormick -- offered new details of the planned development during a meeting with Editorial Board members.. They also offered assurances that it will use the best available technology and meet strict environmental standards.

But it might take more than those assurances to quell the worries and opposition that have been growing among neighbors and environmental groups since plans for the plant were announced this spring.

A new group called Keep Erie's Environment Protected has formed to challenge plans for the plant.

Gatto said he could not yet offer technical data on emissions and environmental details that opponents have sought.

Those, he said, will come when project sponsors apply for environmental air quality permits.. They hope to do that by Dec. 1.

But the sponsors did offer a schedule for the plant's development and insight into its operations.

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

Before then, he said, the community will be given a clearer vision of the project.

Gatto said sponsors initially planned an \$80 million project, but the price has grown to \$150 million as development of the project matured and features were added.

Rubino said the plant is not a tire plant, and it is not an incinerator.

Rather, it is a power-generating plant fueled by waste tires and using circulating fluidized bed technology -- a process that does not burn tires, but relies on a chemical reaction for combustion to generate heat.

"The idea is to use tires to generate heat.. That heat boils water.. That water turns into steam.. That turns a couple of big steam turbines, which will produce a net value of about 90 megawatts of electricity," he said.

That electricity could be sold to power companies, or sold to large local industrial users or municipalities.

The plant will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 65 acres of the South Yard portion of the former International Paper site off East Lake Road.. The plant will be designed to use about 30 million waste tires a year -- about 10 percent of the 300 million waste tires the nation generates each year.

Rubino said there will be no smell; the plant will be completely enclosed; and noise will primarily come from trains that will deliver 80 percent to 85 percent of the tires used by the plant.

Gatto and Rubino said there will be no tire piles.. Vendors will be responsible for getting the tires to the plant.. The tires will be taken directly from railroad cars and chipped into 2-inch pieces and stored in an enclosed building until they are used for fuel.

Vendors who supply the equipment, Gatto said, will not only have to guarantee that it will satisfy state environmental officials, but also convince financial institutions that the investment is safe and reliable.

Gatto said the plant's 60-person work force will come almost entirely from the Erie area.. He said the jobs will average \$50,000 a year and range from a high of more than \$80,000 a year for top management to more than \$30,000 a year for maintenance workers.. Rubino said the plant will need specialized workers like boiler engineers and steam fitters.

"These are good jobs," Rubino said.

Rubino said the site offers tax abatement as a Keystone Opportunity Zone through 2013, but sponsors are willing to make payments in lieu of taxes to contribute to the city and school district until then.

The sponsors acknowledged that there is currently no other plant in the U.S.. that uses the same technology and runs on waste tires for fuel, although there are some overseas..

There is one tires-to-energy plant in Sterling, Conn., but it is smaller than the one proposed here and uses different technology.

Byline: Jim Carroll