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Pittsfield

Biodiesel Company Benefits From Grant

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PITTSFIELD — A biodiesel production company, with plans to convert refined vegetable oil into 50 million gallons of fuel each year, has received a \$450,000 grant for engineering and development costs at the Hubbard Avenue industrial property it leases from Crane & Co.

Berkshire Biodiesel's latest grant from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative supplements a \$3.06 million award earlier this year from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation. That money is earmarked for railroad track improvements work deemed critical for the project.

The company's president, Garth Klimchuk, said in an e-mail recently that plans for a September 2007 groundbreaking were unrealistic because permitting for the \$50 million project is taking longer than expected.

The Dalton Zoning Board of Appeals will meet again Dec. 4 to deliberate on the company's request for permits related to railroad tracks leading to the development site. Other state and local permits are required as well.

At the same time, the company is designing an expanded plan for processing raw material into fuel, securing financing and seeking to hire a project manager, Klimchuk noted.

"We've made excellent progress," he wrote.

Berkshire Biodiesel is one of two projects on the boards for the property.

Energy Answers Corp. already operates there, producing steam for Crane's papermaking operation by burning much of the county's trash.

Crane also would gain more power from another plant being designed for the site by Tamarack Energy Inc. — a subsidiary of a Boston-based engineering firm — which is in the early stages of plans for a \$175 million electrical plant that would be fired with recycled wood products from sawmills, construction projects and local timber.

Crane would claim 20 percent of that plant's electricity for its own operation.

That plant is three to four years away from making its first megawatt, but it is a time frame that project manager Matthew Wolfe said is typical for the industry. Despite the time involved, he said, there is little question of its viability and investor appeal.

"There are a lot of reasons why there is more momentum now ... energy cost concerns, national security and gas prices," he said. "And if we sell power to Crane, we help them remain competitive and keep those jobs."

Tamarack Energy would sell its additional electricity to the electrical grid. Some 20 permanent jobs would be created, along with 250 construction-related jobs, Wolfe said.

Berkshire Biodiesel is backed by a New York-based investment firm, NorthWinds Renewables LLC. The company will lease the former Beloit manufacturing property at 448 Hubbard Ave., a 45,000-square-foot facility. About 30 permanent jobs would result.

"We underestimated the amount of time needed to obtain state and local permits, and we decided to expand the original design to allow us to process additional feedstocks, which will allow us to be far more competitive," Klimchuk wrote.

He said engineering and design work should be completed in January, when final state and local permits will be submitted for review. He projected approvals by March. The Pittsfield operation would be the largest such plant in the Northeast.

The prospect of a renewable energy complex, on a single site, is good news for Tyler Fairbank, executive director of the Berkshire Economic Development Corp.

"There are other renewable energy projects in the pipeline, which are potentials, but we now have this energy cluster that's showing real signs of life in the Berkshires," he said. "We're demonstrating how to get it done in the Berkshires. This will be over \$200 million in capital investment."

Tamarack Energy's goal is to build a 50-megawatt electrical generation plant, large enough to provide electricity for 44,000 homes. Wolfe said Tamarack's parent company, Haley & Aldrich, has developed a smaller such plant that operates in Fitchburg.

Berkshire Biodiesel would produce fuel for diesel engines, home heating and power-generating companies.

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