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Doctors oppose biomass plant

Mass. Medical Society:
Particulates at any level
pose health threat

By RICHIE DAVIS
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The Massachusetts Medical Society has adopted a resolution opposing the proposed Greenfield wood-burning power plant as an "unacceptable public health risk."

The 22,000-member state organization's leadership body also voted to oppose the biomass plants proposed for Russell and Palmer, and to urge the state government to adopt policies to minimize approval and construction of

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Council OKs mayor to enter into contract for water use for biomass plant

By ANITA PHILLIPS
Recorder Staff

GREENFIELD — Town Council voted Wednesday night to amend the town's sewer rules and allow the mayor to enter into a contract to sell treated wastewater to the man who wants to build a 47-megawatt biomass electrical plant planned for Butternut Street.

Councilors spent about two-and-a-half hours debating a contract Mayor William Martin and Department of Public Works

Councilors spent about two-and-a-half hours debating a contract Mayor William Martin and Department of Public Works Director Sandra Shields have spent months working on so that Matthew Wolfe of Madera Energy Inc. of Cambridge can buy treated wastewater for cooling the Pioneer Renewable Energy plant.

While a handful of the 12 councilors at the public meeting Wednesday night believed it would be best to table the vote to give authority to Martin to enter into the contract, others believed that state and federal regulations will protect the town and that a number of "out" clauses placed in the contract would do the same. It was a 6 to 5 vote to approve the 20-year contract and give Martin the authority to sign.

Precinct 5 Councilor David Singer requested the council amend wording in the contract that would force Pioneer to treat the water to "potable" levels, so that anyone would feel comfortable drinking the water before it is

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Water contract

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used for cooling and released as vapor from cooling towers.

Wolfe disagreed, saying it would be too expensive and that there is no clear definition of "potable." He said he had made many concessions to the town already.

Singer said with people's fears of toxins in the treated wastewater, his idea might make them, and some councilors, feel better. The council voted against the amendment.

The 20-year contract the mayor will sign with Wolfe will allow him, as part of construc-

tion of his plant, to install a 5.1-mile cooling water line from the town's sewage treatment plant on Deerfield Street to Butternut Street.

About two dozen people attended the meeting, but were not allowed to speak.

The council had to first vote the changes to the sewer rules, because current rules do not allow it to sell treated wastewater for any reason.

Councilors said they probably wouldn't have been voting on the issue at this time if not for the biomass plant, but all but At-large Councilor Alfred

Siano, who voted against changing the rules, and Precinct 7 Councilor Jeanne Canteen, who was not in attendance, said it was a good idea to change the town rules, so the town could sell treated wastewater for other reasons in the future.

Shields said the town's treatment plant can generate enough treated wastewater and sell it to the biomass plant without hurting the town or its drinking water supply.

Wolfe plans to use the effluent to cool his biomass plant and supply air treatment systems.

Martin expects the town will receive about \$33 million from the plant over the life of the 20-year contract. The plant will

pay for the treated wastewater it uses, as well as sewer and water fees based on how much it uses. It will also pay for the electricity used to pump the water to the plant.

Councilors who said during the debate that they would vote for the contract, said the revenues it would bring to the town were important and significant enough to trust that if biomass was found to be "bad" for any reason, they would feel comfortable relying on state and federal regulations to prevent a plant from coming to Greenfield.

The Pioneer plant will use about 640,000 gallons of treated wastewater a day, which will travel from Deerfield Street to High Street and French King

Highway to Butternut Street through a 5.1-mile, 10-inch ductile iron line.

The treated wastewater will be used for cooling and any remaining water will be piped back through the town's sewer system to its treatment plant to be treated again before it is discharged into the Deerfield River. The biomass plant will also treat the water as it comes into the plant and as it leaves. About 80 percent is expected to be lost to evaporation and drift, which are small water particles released from the cooling tower.

The town has rules about discharge, which the biomass plant will have to follow, so by the time the water gets back to

the treatment plant and before it goes into the river, it must be devoid of toxins and be at a temperature of less than 104 degrees Fahrenheit, according to Shields.

State and federal environmental rules govern what the plant releases into the air.

Martin and Shields both attended the meeting and spoke in favor of the contract they have come to agreement on with Wolfe. Shields said the town doesn't currently test for the types of toxins opponents are worried about, such as those found in excess pharmaceuticals and personal care products — so, they could also be in water released to the Deerfield River.

Doctors: Biomass

■ Doctors: Biomass

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new biomass plants.

It also agreed to urge state and federal governments to remove large-scale biomass electricity generation plants from the list of technologies eligible to receive renewable energy credits, federal stimulus funds and Massachusetts Technology Collaborative loans; and to urge the state to extend regulatory authority by its Department of Environmental Protection to small-scale biomass facilities "to ensure that the most protective air pollution emissions controls are used."

The 47-megawatt Pioneer Renewable Energy plant proposed for a site adjacent to the Greenfield Industrial Park is awaiting approval of a "Major Comprehensive Air Plan Permit" from the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The Mass. Medical Society action Saturday follows a resolution by the medical society's Franklin-Hampshire District last month to endorse an October vote by the Hampden District Medical Society's opposing construction of the 50-megawatt wood-burning plant proposed for Russell as "an unacceptable threat to the health of the citizens of the Pioneer Valley," according to Dr. Laurence Klein of Connecticut River Internists. Klein said he brought the issue to the district meeting based on his concerns about the potential effects of air pollution — especially particulate emissions from the proposed Greenfield plant — on area residents.

Dr. Jefferson Dickey, a staff physician at the Community Health Center of Franklin County, brought the proposal to the Massachusetts Medical Society's interim meeting in Waltham last weekend.

"The issue for me is that particulate air pollution kills," said Dickey, who as a research fellow at Harvard School of Public Health studied the health effects of air pollution. Hundreds of studies, he said, have shown "very consistent associations" between particulate air pollution (from wood smoke) and public health.

Those cross-sectional and case-control studies have shown a correlation between areas with high particulate levels and high mortality rates from chronic heart and lung disease.

"What we found is that if you live in an area that has a

high particulate air pollution level," he said, "you're more likely to have increased respiratory disease, increased asthma attacks, increased asthma medication use, increased days lost from school and work due to chest illness, increased emergency room visits for heart and lung disease, increased hospital rates for heart and lung disease and increased mortality rates for heart and lung disease."

Dickey, a former chair of the Mass. Medical Society's Committee on Environmental and Occupational Health, added, "The people who are suggesting we build these power plants say they'll meet all EPA regulations, and I don't know whether that's true or not. But very clearly, anybody who understands the science can't really think the EPA regulations are protective of the public health, because there essentially is no threshold below which particulate air pollution is safe."

The policy was approved unanimously by the society's House of Delegates, composed of representative physicians from across the state.

The Massachusetts Lung Association also opposes construction of the Greenfield biomass plant as "an inefficient and dirty way of producing energy," according to Scott Keays, the association's public policy manager. "We are very pleased to have the Massachusetts Medical Society join us in our efforts."

Current state policy considers biomass fuel renewable, because trees consumed as fuel are assumed to re-grow, and biomass electricity generation is eligible for financial incentives under the state's Green Communities Act, which mandates that an increasing proportion of the state's power be generated from renewable sources.

The medical society's action comes days after the state halted applications for qualifying biomass plants for state financial incentives, in part citing concerns about their emissions of the unregulated greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide.

It also comes after the Environmental Protection Agency said greenhouse gases "threaten the public health and welfare of the American people" and that carbon dioxide should be regulated under the Clean Air Act.