

California Coastal Commission approves Pacifica biodiesel plant

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Some of the most impassioned public speakers well known at local government meetings presented themselves before the California Coastal Commission last Friday to speak about the application for the biodiesel plant at the wastewater treatment plant.

The Coastal Commission unanimously approved the application of Whole Energy Fuels Corp. to build a facility that takes waste grease from local restaurants and convert it into fuel. Besides accepting the full list of conditions detailed in its staff report, the commissioners also approved two additional conditions.

One of the additional conditions concerned the disposal of glycerin. Whole Energy will be required to annually provide the Coastal Commission executive director with a report about the percentage of glycerin by-product sold and disposed of and the location of the disposal, if any. If glycerin is disposed of within the coastal zone, Whole Energy will need to apply for an amendment to the permit.

Pacifican Todd Bray raised the idea for the other new condition that the commissioners approved. He requested all the records about the compliance measures required by the Coastal Commission be made available to the public. Pacifica mayor Jim Vreeland assured Bray and the commissioners the information would be made public. That information as well as a final list of the Coastal Commissions' approved conditions will be put on the project's website, www.pacificabiodiesel.com.

Commissioner Sara Wan questioned what feedstock was going to be used to process biodiesel. Atul Deshmane, president of Whole Energy, assured her the operation was to use only recycled commercial waste vegetable oil.

"We are buying local feedstock," he said, and supplying the fuel to 25 stations and to the dozens of individuals who wish to buy a biodiesel fuel supply.

Coastal Commission staff member Christina Cairns, who is an analyst in energy, ocean resources and a member of the Federal consistency division, wrote the staff report. While recommending the commissioners approve the project, she stated all equipment will be housed within a 4,000 square foot warehouse, 99 percent of the volatile organic matter is expected to be removed, the project will not impact the nearby endangered species habitat area but a fence will be installed to create a wildlife barrier, the potential for a hazardous

materials spill is minimized due to safety measures worked out with staff and with other agencies, it will aesthetically fit in and the project will not impede public access.

In introducing the letters staff received in opposition to the project, Cairns stated most of those issues - such as proceeding on an amendment to an existing environmental impact report - were matters under the jurisdiction of the city of Pacifica, not the Coastal Commission.

Mayor Vreeland told the commissioners why the city of Pacifica contracted with Whole Energy to build the plant in Pacifica. With the addition of solar panels, the cost has already been reduced by 15 percent.

"We are working to reduce the energy costs of the plant. Biodiesel is an opportunity to do that. Oil and grease will be pulled out of restaurants and used to power our generator. We think cities will look at putting in tertiary plants powered with solar and biodiesel. We can save another three percent of our costs. We think this is so exciting. It will help Pacifica meet its legislative compliances to reduce the grease from the wastewater stream and to reduce its carbon footprint," Vreeland said.

Deshmane told the Coastal Commissioners how the project is a step toward making a local source of fuel, for which there is a huge demand, from local feedstock of recycled grease. The cost is reduced because of its design to function with the wastewater treatment plant.

Jorin Mamen, Whole Energy research engineer, spoke of the technical aspects of the plant. He told the commissioners the operation will use only reclaimed water, not fresh water. He assured the commissioners the operation was a safe one that will be completely enclosed. He said that concerns about odor control, traffic spill management and visual impact have all been addressed in the final plans.

But those who spoke in opposition to the project painted a completely different picture for the commissioners.

Mike Bell, a Parks, Beaches and Recreation commission, said the project is too close to a populated area already reeling from the effect of bad odors from a wastewater treatment plant that has never run properly.

"I wish you would increase the safety of the human beings as well as the snakes and the frogs. The students at the school across the highway already have to take cover to avoid the putrid smell from the sewage treatment plant," he said.

Frank Vella agreed. "The one of a kind wastewater treatment plant has not worked properly since it went operational in 2001, the contractor who built the plant no longer exists and parts need to be special ordered. The smell to the area affects businesses and residents alike," he said.

Mark Stechbart said, "Whole Energy allows the overwhelming bulk of three million gallons of product will be trucked to Richmond. I say do all the work in Richmond. This project should be rejected. It is absolutely the wrong coastal zone precedent to set."

Jim Wagner said the lease between Whole Energy and the city is not favorable to the city. "The city's agenda summary report of Jan 14, 2008 states the current power usage of the wastewater plant is 18,000 kilowatts a day. The lease calls for 1,000 a day or 5.6 percent of the total power used at the plant. How can the applicant claim this is a co-gen facility when in reality the numbers point to a purely industrial use site?" "I've been in the real estate finance business for almost 20 years and this is the worst lease quote I've ever seen," Wagner said.

Bray said the amount of grease removed from the wastewater stream would be "less than the proverbial drop in the bucket." But retired director of public works, Scott Holmes, who introduced himself as working with Whole Energy on this project, said the big problem has been with grease getting stuck in the collector pipes, and this project would assist with that. Holmes said. The facility would provide emergency fuel if there was a closure on Highway 1.

Nancy Hall told the commissioners some of the comments they heard from the opposing point of view were misleading and inaccurate.

"This is the kind of innovation the future demands," she said at the meeting.

After the meeting, Hall told the Tribune she was very excited about the Coastal Commission decision.

"It's such an enormous accomplishment and such a vote of confidence for this project. It would be great if we could have this moment to realize this is an accomplishment. I wish there would be some acceptance of recognition of that from people who have this political ax to grind and want to tank the project. It was heartwarming to see this group really going on about the habitat issues when five minutes ago they were willing to cover the entire site with construction. That seemed disingenuous to me," Hall said.

Vreeland also reflected on the positive impact the approval will have on the city of Pacifica. As a member of the San Mateo County Transportation Board, he is discussing using biodiesel in the SamTrans buses. "We are the first city in California that is able to get a permit for this sort of facility. San Francisco is trying to replicate what we are doing. We are ahead of the curve. The amazing thing is it's the private sector investing \$1.5 million in our town. As a country, as we try to wean us off petroleum based products, it's exciting that we have something in Pacifica that we will hopefully be able to retail, as well. This is a big step - locally produced from waste stock, locally used - that's pretty exciting," Vreeland said.