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Get out your veggie oil - Pacifica plans to build biodiesel plant

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The latest exorbitant gas prices and fear of global warming are making biodiesel a highly desirable option. But while President Bush advocates farmed fuel throughout the country and abroad, Pacifica is choosing a much more environmentally sustainable road. The city has partnered with Pacifica's Livability Project and Whole Energy, a biodiesel production company from Washington, to build a biodiesel plant that will bring recycled veggie fuel to locals and help with the city's energy production and clean sewage water.

The plant has been in the works for three years, but it was finally kicked into high gear last week when the California Air Resources Board awarded the partners a grant of \$620,000 for its construction. "That's a real stamp of approval that this is an important project to fund," said Mayor Pro Tem Jim Vreeland. "I'm excited for what it holds for the future of Pacifica."

The grant covers about one third of the total needed for construction, so the partners plan to look for private investors and other grants. With one some money already in the pocket, Vreeland is optimistic that others will come. The plant, scheduled to open in the first quarter of 2008, will be next to the Calera Creek water recycling plant, with which it will share some functions and facilities for operation efficiency. The biodiesel will be produced from used cooking oil collected in San Mateo and adjacent counties, which will help get rid of grease in sewage pipes.

Part of the produced fuel will be used to operate a generator that will provide electric power to the biodiesel facility and the city's water recycling plant, thus offsetting peak electricity and saving the city energy costs of up to \$200,000 a year. Vreeland explained that when the energy rates skyrocket during peak demand, the city will be able to temporarily take the plant off the grid.

The fuel will also be used to run Pacifica's diesel trucks and in some way will be available to the public. Whole Energy's president Atul Deshmane says that if they cannot find local gas stations to carry their product, they can always sell the nontoxic biodiesel out of a trailer at the farmer's market. What really matters is localizing energy production. "Making energy local is a tremendously exciting idea, people want that," says Deshmane. "We're hearing a lot about huge plants, it's refreshing to hear about highly sustainable projects as well. We wanted to grow a company in the Bay Area because we see a similar mindset in terms of the desire for sustainability."

Although this will not be the first biodiesel plant in the country, the partnership between the city, a non-profit group, and a private company is truly unique. "Alternative energy is where our future is going to be and Pacifica is at the forefront, showing that it can be done on a local level," says Vreeland. "It's community-driven, it's city-supported, and there is a private sector - that's a real recipe for a successful project."

The biodiesel production plant was spearheaded by environmental activist Nancy Hall as well as other members of Pacifica's Livability Project who ran a biodiesel co-op out of a garage. When Hall got her first biodiesel car - a 1979 Mercedes designed to run on diesel - she realized that there was a problem with the supply. "We were getting our diesel from a guy in Richmond," she remembers. "He was the only person I saw who was making pretty decent quantity and pretty decent quality. I realized that was a huge stumbling block with it. We couldn't get people to climb on board, because it was expensive, it was hard to find, and it wasn't always good quality. That troubled me. I thought there is this great alternative, but it's not as available as it should be; it shouldn't be completely rocket science to figure out how to make it on a bigger scale."

Hall explains that while recycled biodiesel can be easily made in someone's garage, those who try to increase the production scale usually go out of business because the equipment needed to make a large quantity and to adhere to the newly created quality standards requires spending big money. "Then, I had this little light bulb go off in my head: we gotta do this in Pacifica," says Hall. "I wanted to find a good green project for Pacifica and I thought this could be it. We care so much about our land that sooner or later it's going to bring in money for us."

To achieve that, Hall worked with Mike Brown on a business plan that would create a win-win situation for all the partners and with Scott Holmes on combining the biodiesel facilities with the water plant. Now, besides getting more funds, the partners have to get permitting and find contractors to build the plant. Then, it's all to the pump. "We want to show how municipalities can become more responsible for their energy needs in a more sustainable way," says Hall. "We want to be a model of that with hopes that when people see how smart this is, they would want to do it in other places."