

Burned-garbage energy for UNL depends on feasibility study results

By Mike Schmoldt

When experts finish a study next month for UNL to determine the merits of buying steam energy from a proposed garbage-burning plant, the company that wants to build the plant will know whether it has a customer or not.

Energy Complexes, Inc. won approval from the Lincoln City Council last week to exceed the city's 75-foot height restriction by 15 feet if and when the plant is built. The city and ECI have been working together on the project, but so far no customers have said they will buy steam from the plant as an energy source.

Part of the problem is the 20-year contract ECI wants its customers to sign.

John Goebel, UNL vice chancellor for business and finance, said it would take a prophet to predict how much other fuels will cost that far in the future. UNL now buys natural gas from Minnegasco to produce steam in its boilers.

"The firm says that in the long run, it will be cheaper," Goebel said. "Our initial investigation cast some doubt on that."

Goebel said the initial study made university officials "want to ask a lot more questions." The NU Board of Regents approved a \$17,500 study now being done by two firms to answer those questions.

A local food processor, Archer-Daniels-Midland Co., did its own study and decided not to buy steam from the proposed plant. Company officials familiar with the reasons for the rejection were not available for comment.

Harley Schrader, director of UNL's physical plant department, said future fuel costs "are the big question mark," but that there are other questions as well.

They include the technological soundness of the plant, possible impacts on traffic at the proposed site at 32nd Street and Huntington Avenue and whether the plant will produce pollution and be accepted by the community.

Schrader also said that although the university will not be investing its own money, it is studying the profitability of the plant because it does not want to incur the wrath of investors who may lose money if the project "goes sour."

The plant would produce about 85 percent of the steam now used on City Campus, Schrader said. UNL's present steam plant would remain operating to make up the difference and could be brought back up to 100 percent in case the garbage-burning plant had to be shut down for any reason, he said.

The regents will have the final word on the matter, probably acting on a recommendation by UNL Chancellor Martin Massengale once the feasibility study is complete.

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