

News from The Mecklenburg Times



Environmental groups not keen on 'green' projects

By Tara Ramsey
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As "green" awareness rises across the country, two major projects touted as eco-friendly have been floated recently in the Charlotte area.

One is Charlotte-based Duke Energy Corp.'s proposal to use a form of renewable energy known as biomass at coal-fired generating stations in Williamson, S.C., and Salisbury. The other is ReVenture Park, a project that would convert a 667-acre Superfund site along the Catawba River into Charlotte's first "eco-industrial" park.

Despite the good-for-the-environment claims being made about the projects, some environmental groups are not so sure.

This week, the Central Piedmont Group of the North Carolina chapter of the Sierra Club, Sustain Charlotte and Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation spoke out against aspects of ReVenture Park. The facility has been described by Charlotte-based developer Forsite Development Inc. as one of the most multifaceted renewable-energy developments in the country.

Similarly, the Environmental Defense League, Southern Environmental Law Center and MeadWestvaco Corp. have opposed the registration of Duke's Buck and Lee steam stations as renewable-energy facilities because the wood chips Duke used during a testing phase came from whole trees. Those groups said they support wood waste, not wood chips from whole trees, as a biofuel.

Duke says that the trees were cut down when land had to be cleared for construction of an ash basin on Duke's property. The North Carolina Utilities Commission must now decide if Buck and Lee will be approved as renewable-energy facilities.

Duke is estimating that an eighth of its renewable energy platform will come from woody biomass.

Owen Smith, managing director of Duke's Renewable Strategy and Compliance Division, said in testimony to the utilities commission that studies have shown that there is not enough forest residue available statewide to meet the requirements of a state Senate's bill. A wide interpretation of the law's definition of biomass resource that includes whole trees cut into wood chips is needed for when forest residue is not available, he said.

Duke is also examining the option of using energy crops to help meet the state's requirements and is considering building a biomass-planting project on company land to grow a variety of "next-generation" trees and perennial crops using biomass-specific planting techniques, Tracy Beer, Duke's renewable energy strategy manager, said in her testimony to the utilities commission. The site would be for research and development and as a resource for landowners interested in biomass cultivation and harvesting.

'Gaming the system'

Bill Gupton, chairman of the Central Piedmont Group chapter of the Sierra Club and a critic of aspects of ReVenture Park, said companies are "just gaming the system" by lobbying politicians and threatening that their industry cannot afford to switch to more expensive, but cleaner, sources of energy like solar and wind.

For example, he said, lobbyists worked for very low solar-energy requirements in Senate Bill 3, a Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standard which requires utility companies to meet gradually increased renewable energy platforms between now and 2021. The state enacted the law in 2007.

Gupton said that because of those low solar-energy requirements, Duke has already met its requirement through 2014 that 0.07 percent of its energy needs are generated by solar energy.

"I have friends in the solar-energy field, and they are so disheartened," he said.

Duke Energy spokesman Jason Walls agreed that Duke has met its solar-energy requirements through 2014 and plans to wait to purchase additional solar equipment because prices are dropping. By waiting for the market to stabilize, it will ultimately bring lower costs for the company's customers, he said, adding that Duke has solar panels installed at 16 locations and has contracted with a Davidson County solar farm.

Gupton said the cleanest forms of energy are solar and wind, but cost is a big deterrent for power companies and developers. North Carolina is a great location for offshore and mountain-top wind energy and studies have shown that North Carolina's energy needs could be met completely with wind and solar power, he said.

Changing from coal and nuclear energy to solar and wind would be difficult, but Gupton said studies have shown that solar power is now cheaper than new nuclear ventures.

Gupton said there needs to be transitional strategies to move away from a coal- and nuclear-based energy industry. One way to do so would be to give the same type of incentives to solar- and wind-energy companies as are given to coal and nuclear companies, he said.

"There is a saying: 'You can't turn a battleship around in a bathtub,'" he said. "Part of the problem is that utility companies are being caught in a transition period where their business model is not working for them."

Gupton pointed out that if everyone began putting solar panels on their roofs and selling their excess energy back to power companies, the utilities would eventually be out of business. He said that while upfront costs to install solar panels and "go off the grid" are high at approximately \$18,000, that investment would be returned in 15 to 18 years.

Job creation touted

For Forsite President Tom McKittrick, recycling and emissions are two issues over which developers and environmental groups have historically been at odds.

ReVenture, which is being developed by Forsite, sits on the border of Mecklenburg and Gaston counties and is labeled a Superfund site, a federal designation given to heavily

contaminated areas that pose health and environmental risks. Superfund itself is the name of the federal government's program to clean up those sites.

McKittrick said his company is working with federal and state officials to have it delisted as a Superfund site and declared a brownfield, a name given to abandoned or underused commercial sites, such as former gas stations, where concerns about contamination could hinder redevelopment.

Forsite estimates that ReVenture Park will create more than 1,000 jobs and \$900 million in new investment. Groundbreaking on the park is possible late this year, McKittrick said. He estimates there are 40 people working on the project, from engineers to environmental consultants to lobbyists.

Before construction can begin, developers will need air-quality permits.

At a press conference Tuesday at the Hal Marshall Center in Charlotte, environmental groups voiced their complaints about the level of emissions from a 30- to 49-megawatt waste-to-energy biomass power plant included in the plans for ReVenture.

McKittrick said the biomass plant will use a gasification technique and that it is not an incinerator as the environmental groups are describing it.

"Gasification is a new technology," McKittrick said. "There are multiple examples throughout Europe where these facilities are successful. We made a philosophical decision that we would rather be on the front end of new technology than on the back end of old technology."

He said the mass burn incinerators — the "old technology" — burn raw garbage to create electricity and are inefficient, high in emissions and create a lot of ash.

He said gasification uses a more energy-efficient conversion of high heat and low oxygen that creates a synthetic gas and a smaller emission footprint. It also uses shredded waste, which is more easily burned.

But environmental groups disagree and claim that, among other things, the gasification technique is less efficient than mass burn incinerators that are known for the polluting effects.

Incensed over incinerators

Gupton detailed the complaints of the local environmental groups Tuesday at the Hal Marshall Center. He said the proposed "staged incinerator" emits comparable levels of toxic emissions to conventional mass burn incinerators and that emissions limits do not ensure safety. Emissions from incinerators are not measured sufficiently and reported levels can be misleading, he said, adding that gasification incinerators have been plagued by malfunctions, explosions and shutdowns and that gasification is less efficient at generating electricity than mass burn incinerators.

Also, staged incinerators, he said, are not compatible with recycling because they compete for the same financing and undermine the efforts to minimize production of unrecyclable materials.

Recycling was addressed in Forsite's development plans for ReVenture Park, McKittrick said. There will be a fuel-processing center where recyclable material will be removed from municipal solid waste before that waste is shredded and used to generate energy, he said.

"You can landfill it or create energy with it," McKittrick said. "You're effectively supporting landfilling if you are not supporting creating energy with (waste), and that's counterintuitive."

He said landfills create methane gas and leave a huge carbon footprint, a term used to describe greenhouse emissions.

"Multiple EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) studies show that for every one ton of trash diverted from a landfill, it offsets one ton of greenhouse gas emissions," he said.

For Gupton, avoiding the waste altogether is a better answer than the gasification technique.

"Transferring our trash from a landfill to a skyfill is an unacceptable solution to a very difficult problem," Gupton said.

The answer, for Gupton, starts with recycling, reusing and composting. He said he and his wife dispose of less than a brown paper bag's worth of garbage a week.

When it comes to recycling, education and public policy are key to improving the recycling rate of 12 percent in Mecklenburg County, Gupton said. If that were done, the landfill problem would be greatly reduced, he said.

He cited places with strong policies like San Francisco, which has a goal of zero waste by 2020 and recycles 72 percent of its waste.

Gupton said Mecklenburg County's recycling rate has only increased 1 percent in two years.

He described a 2009 law that banned plastic bottles and wooden pallets from landfills. He said a public official has been quoted by Charlotte media as saying that because it was a state law, local officials would not be enforcing it.

"You had a new law that was designed to keep all of these water bottles and soft drink bottles and juice bottles and all of that out of landfill, but you have your public official saying, 'Wink, wink. Yeah it's a law but we won't enforce it,'" Gupton said.

Some aspects supported

Environmental groups are not entirely against ReVenture Park.

They support the 300,000-square-foot eco-park at ReVenture that will cater to businesses focused on energy efficiency, renewable energy and environmental technology. They also support the 4-megawatt solar field to be built on a 25-acre closed landfill and a 185-acre conservation easement and trail system along Long Creek basin that will connect the Carolina Thread Trail and the U.S. National White Water center that are also part of the overall design.

The environmental groups are conditionally supportive of the conversion of the site from Superfund to brownfield and of a regional wastewater treatment facility. But they are concerned about the transformation of toxic wastewater sludge into an energy source because of the many contaminants in sewage, like pathogens, pesticides and other chemicals, pharmaceuticals and hormones.

Forsite's plans for the site also include the development of a biofuels-production facility, a propane-vehicle conversion facility, a green-business incubator and a green-technology research laboratory.

McKittrick said the concept behind ReVenture can be duplicated across the Southeast at large dormant sites. He said creating renewable energy is a new focus and natural progression for Forsite and an opportunity to create a meaningful amount of renewable energy while creating green jobs and being environmentally focused.

"We've been hard-pressed to find anyone to tell us that what we are doing here is a bad idea," he said.

For environmental groups, it's important to focus on the details and not just the big picture.

"Unfortunately, 'green' and 'sustainable' have become buzz words that companies use pretty indiscriminately," Gupton said. "I saw a toilet paper manufacturer that claimed they were 100 percent-recycled and I knew they used virgin wood for their paper. I read the fine print and it said the cardboard tube was made 100 percent of recycled material."

Superfund: A federal program designed to clean up containing heavily contaminated sites that pose a hazard to the environment.

Brownfield: An abandoned or underused commercial site, such as a former gas station, that is contaminated, concerns about which can complicate redevelopment.

ReVenture Park at a glance

What:

Charlotte-based Forsite Development plans to redevelop a 667-acre Superfund site into Charlotte's first "eco-industrial" park.

Where:

Along the Catawba River on the border of Mecklenburg and Gaston counties

When it will open:

Groundbreaking could begin late this year. Design and the purchasing of equipment will continue through the end of the year.

Expected employment:

More than 1,000 "green-collar" jobs with another 800 construction jobs during the development of the site

Expected invested:

\$922 million

Source: www.reventurepark.com

<http://mecktimes.wordpress.com/2010/07/23/environmental-groups-not-keen-on-%E2%80%98green%E2%80%99-projects/>