

Austin Energy seeks public input on city's renewable fuel options

By Katie Humphrey

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Austin Energy plans to use more renewable fuels to generate power, and utility officials said Tuesday that they want the public to help them choose which ones.

Austin Energy General Manager Roger Duncan, accompanied by Mayor Will Wynn, outlined an eight-month process that will kick off in October to educate the public about renewable fuels and seek residents' opinions on different options, including wind, solar and biomass power. There will be two sets of community meetings, a 40-page informational booklet, a survey and a Web site with facts, a blog for questions and power generation games the public can use to evaluate different fuel choices.

The first public meeting will be at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 22 at Austin City Hall.

The Web site will be launched next week, and the information booklet will be available before the first meeting.

The utility must use 30 percent renewable fuels by 2020 to meet goals set by the City Council when it passed the Climate Protection Plan in 2007. The city has already planned additional use of solar panels to produce electricity. And, amid controversy and complaints about lack of openness, the council recently approved a \$2.3 billion contract for biomass power, saying it was necessary to reach the renewable energy goal.

Wynn, who pushed the Climate Protection Plan, said Austin plays an "indispensable role" in the national shift to renewable fuels because its city-owned utility is dealing with rapid growth and a public that is engaged in environmental issues in a state known for its pollution and fossil fuel consumption.

The effort being launched by Austin Energy will "prove to be an unprecedented amount of public participation" in the utility's planning to meet power generation needs.

The public participation process, which includes the hiring of consultants and other logistical expenses, will cost \$384,000. The goal is to make a recommendation to the council early next summer about future-generation fuels.

Austin Energy town hall meetings

Austin Energy's first round of town hall meetings to gather ideas about renewable fuels will begin next month. All meetings will be at 6:30 p.m.

Oct. 22, Austin City Hall, 301 W. Second St.

Oct. 28, Sunset Valley City Hall, 3205 Jones Road

Nov. 6, University Hills Library, 4721 Loyola Lane

Nov. 12, Travis County Service Center, 4501 RM 620 North

Nov. 19, Metz Recreation Center, 2407 Canterbury St.

Duncan said each community meeting will begin with a presentation of Austin Energy's draft resource plan, a working document that combines current fuels — coal, nuclear and gas — with future possible sources — biomass, wind and solar — to outline a scenario that would allow the utility to meet demand for power generation through 2020.

By the end of 2008, 12 percent of Austin Energy's electricity will come from renewable sources.

The draft plan, which would increase the utility's total generation from 2,760 megawatts to 4,135 megawatts, relies heavily on wind power, incrementally adding 775 megawatts from that source, by 2020. Biomass power, which can be generated by burning organic materials such as wood waste, would provide 212 megawatts, and solar power would contribute 101 megawatts by 2020. Those numbers and fuels, as well as any other renewable energy ideas, will be up for debate at the public forums.

"We're reaching a point where we need to make some fundamental decisions" about fuel sources to reach the council's goals, Duncan said. "We're asking the public, 'What kind of mix would you like to see there?'"

khumphrey@statesman.com; 445-3658

Note: the East Texas Plant is to produce 100 mqw.