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News

Bio-solids plant is city's largest project ever



Rendering of the outside design of the \$180 million bio-solids energy plant being proposed in southeast Banning, near the city's wastewater treatment plant. Trucks would unload sewage sludge inside the building.
 A proposed \$180 million bio-solid energy plant in Banning would be the largest commercial project in the city's history, generating as much as 45 percent of the city's electricity needs, providing many local jobs and contributing as much as \$2 million a year in city tax revenues, the project's manager says.

Micheal Bracken, founder of Development Management Group, Inc., said in an interview that if the project gets the go-ahead by Banning's City Council in September, construction near the city's sewer treatment plant could begin by early next year, with two of three power-generation units operating by January 2011.

Bracken, who served on the Banning City Council in the late 1990s, is an investor in the sludge plant being developed by Liberty Energy Inc., of Bakersfield, on 20 acres near Smith Creek at the end of East Westward Avenue next to the city's wastewater treatment plant.

At full capacity, the state-of-the-art plant could turn treated sewage sludge and green waste from two million residents in cities from San Diego to Kern counties into electricity, which would be sold to the city's municipal utility at a discounted price.

"Liberty Energy is first, and foremost an environmental company," Bracken said. "Our vision is to create a safe renewable power generation facility in Banning that will provide renewable power to the community, create new job opportunities and generate about \$180 million in economic investment that will also produce about \$2 million of revenue annually for the city of Banning."

The plant would generate as much as 17 megawatts of electricity by burning sludge and green waste at 1,500 degrees, creating steam to run turbines. Banning could purchase all or as much of the plant's electricity as it needs.

While the project, called Liberty Energy XXIII, has inched along in planning for more than a year a report on its environmental impact on the area was just released and was the subject of a public "scoping" last Thursday at City Hall.

Bracken, an investor in the plant and its project manager, said Liberty has spent more than \$2.5 million on the project so far, including \$500,000 on the environmental report, which, he said, Liberty had no control over.

Bracken said that the plant would have innovative equipment, some of it developed by Liberty Energy, to eliminate odor and reduce air pollution. He said the plant meets rigid air-quality standards of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the toughest anti-pollution regulations in the world.

"The air out is cleaner than the air going in," Bracken said.

Bracken said he knows of no organized opposition to the bio-solids plant.

He acknowledged that critics usually focus on four factors: odor, traffic, noise and how the plant looks. He said Liberty Energy has been careful in addressing each concern. He said the plant would have an attractive appearance.

Bracken said that while the sludge will be hauled to the plant in large trucks, the trucks are sealed and there is no leakage. Once at the plant, a vacuum-like system ensures that none of the sludge or odor escapes outside during unloading. The trucks drive into the plant to unload.

"Odor is a common question," Bracken said. "On the bio-solid side, our trucks will enter reverse air chambers and the material is unloaded and the trucks are washed in a sealed system; the material then goes to a series of silos that are fully contained with charcoal type filters. Therefore, there is little to no odor, and certainly no odor" in the area from which



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people can see the plant. "Our plant is located right next to the wastewater treatment ponds," said Bracken. "Now that's odor."

Bracken said that many people don't realize that as many as 300 trucks loaded with sewage sludge from Los Angeles now pass through Banning every day on their way to a landfill in Arizona, where the sludge is dumped.

Bracken said that the plant includes three modular units, each handling about 25 trucks per day, for a total of 75 truckloads of sludge a day. Each truck hauls 20 tons of sludge for a total of about 1,500 tons of bio-solids a day.

Bracken said the sludge trucks would take the Hargrave Street exit off the I-10 south, turn east on Lincoln to Hathaway and then onto Westward to the entrance of the facility.

He contended that trucks would not pass residential areas, although three homes in an industrial zone are on the route.

He said Liberty Energy would spend as much as \$2 million on lights and other improvements on Hargrave and along the route to improve traffic flow.

Bracken said that Banning's wastewater treatment plant and public utility would benefit from the project.

He said Liberty Energy would process the city's sludge at no cost, saving the city money it now spends to haul it away. In addition, he said Liberty would sell the city's public utility 15 megawatts of power at a price about five cents per kilowatt cheaper than what it costs on the open market.

In a serious blackout, Banning's utility could count on at least 15 megawatts of power, or about 45 percent of its average output, from the Liberty plant, Bracken said. The few megawatts of electricity not sold to Banning would power the plant, Bracken said.

The plant would be built in stages. Two of the three units would be finished and in operation by January 2011. The third unit would be finished in January 2013, Bracken said.

During construction, the project would generate about 100 jobs, and once completed, it would take as many as 75 employees to operate it, according to Bracken. The average hourly wage paid at the plant will be \$20 an hour and the plant's payroll will amount to more than \$3 million in wages and benefits.

He estimated that the project would pump \$127 million into the Pass economy over 10 years. He said because the plant is proposed in redevelopment area, the city would pocket more than \$12 million in property taxes over the same period.

Bracken also said that the plant would help Banning's utility meet goals of having electricity generated from renewable sources.

Bracken estimates that the project will have an overall economic impact of \$127 million over the next decade on the Pass Area.

The plant would also process bio-mass or green waste in generating electricity. About 30 percent of the plant's capacity would be green waste, Bracken said. He said that while there will be some mounds of green waste at the plant they will have an emergency water sprinkler-like system or water cannons to moisten the material in case of a fire.

So far as winds blowing the bio-mass materials away, Bracken said, the mounds "will be kept low enough that that's not going to happen."

He said the green waste wouldn't smell. "This material is chipped to a 2 to 4 inch diameter and stored in the biomass yard," he said. "Because we don't use things that compost, the breakdown is much longer in nature. It's the breakdown that creates odor. So there are no odor issues there. SCAQMD will actually review our project and issue an odor control permit."

Liberty makes 80 percent of its revenue by charging cities to take their solid waste sludge. Bracken wouldn't say what cities the company is talking to about sending their sludge to Banning. He did say that the plant could bring in sludge from as far away as San Diego and Kern counties

The site is four-tenths of mile east of the end of Westward Avenue, according to Bracken, on land contiguous to Banning's treatment plant.

He said the plant will be highly regulated by local, state and federal agencies. The city, in issuing a conditional use permit for the project, will be part of oversight.

"The city, in their entitlement process, will consider a conditional use permit (CUP)," said Bracken. "Ultimately the permit will spell out that we are a pervasively regulated business, meaning that the city and a host of local, county, regional, state and federal agencies will have access at any time without notice to inspect our operations."

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