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Ely Biomass Energy Options to be Evaluated

An in-depth financial and environmental evaluation of biomass heating proposals in Ely will be launched at the Ely City Council meeting at 6:00 PM on Tuesday, November 15 at City Hall. The project, which is funded by the Minnesota Environmental Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Citizens Commission of Minnesota Resources (LCCMR), is meant to provide residents and local officials with objective information about local biomass supplies, financial costs, environmental impacts, and assess public acceptability.

A team from Dovetail Partners, a nonprofit forestry research organization, and the University of Minnesota Departments of Forestry Resources and Applied Economics will conduct the study. Gloria Erickson of Ely has been hired to coordinate local community outreach activities, and can be reached at 365-0878 or gjerickson@frontiernet.net to provide input or request information.

“Before deciding whether or not to pursue district heating, the City of Ely needs answers to myriad questions that the Alternative Energy Task Force (AETF) has encountered,” said Mayor Roger Skraba in a letter to the State of Minnesota .

The project will build upon earlier engineering studies that identified district heating and electricity production as one possible outcome. No decisions have been made, and other options could be considered depending on the outcome of the study. “An investment this important requires a thoughtful analysis, including the possibility of walking away if the numbers don’t add up,” says University of Minnesota researcher Dr. Dennis Becker, Forest Resources.

The analysis will include an in-depth assessment of biomass supply within different transport distances from Ely, cost of procurement, and ecological impacts. Current and future estimates will be made of biomass feedstocks from harvest slash, Firewise mitigation treatments, right-of-way clearings, improved forest management, and related activities. Detailed calculations and scenarios comparing financial costs of heat and electricity from fossil fuels versus biomass will be made.

Katie Fernholz, Dovetail Partners Director emphasized the importance of public input and transparency during the study. “In addition to more detailed information, we will put in place a broad public outreach campaign to solicit ideas and concerns about biomass and district heat and power systems for Ely,” she said. “Gloria Erickson is a valuable new member of our team to make sure this happens.”

The study is scheduled to conclude in January 2013.