

Brattleboro Thermal Utility (BTU)

Keeping the Lights On and Keeping Our Damn Yankees/Redsox Nation Warm

Prepared for BTU Working Committee by Richard Foley, June 7, 2008

Imagine that the entire East Coast is abuzz with the story of a small Vermont riverside town that has literally energized its way to an unparalleled level of sustainability and prosperity. Smack in the middle of the Peak Oil meets Falling Dollar meets Cost-of-War meets Wall Street Shenanigans disasters. Brattleboro, once noted only by the artsy crowd up and down the Connecticut River Valley for the vitality of its 'creative economy,' has emerged in 2012 as the Poster Child for Recapturing the American Dream.

\$5 a gallon gasoline, diesel fuel and heating oil? Doubling electric bills? Producers, distributors, retailers closing shop? Head of households choosing to forgo prescriptions in order to feed the family? Desperate folks burning furniture to stay warm? Heating fuel and food shortages?

Not in Brattleboro. After watching - year after year - \$30-45 million of its hard earned wages and profits being drained off to cover the spiraling costs of fuel oil and another \$15 million for electricity, they took post-oil solutions seriously. Role-modeling a rare combination of Yankee ingenuity, Vermont stubbornness and Native People's respect for Mother Nature coupled with the devil-be-damned courage of a dozen Ann Storys and the confident recklessness of a roomful of Ethan Allens, Brattleboro town folk didn't wait around for "the market to decide" or for the magic words, "we're here from the government and we're here to help."

Instead they teased out \$200 million from various public and private sources to design and develop a European-inspired system that burned low-grade wood to generate enough electricity to power most of Windham County, as well as hot water and chilled water that are piped to much of the Brattleboro's housing stock and commercial enterprises. In 2012, the governor cut the ribbon on the nation's first completely new biomass-fueled district heating system.

And the rest, as they say, is history:

- stable, long-term contracts for wood supplies have revived the forest industry that employs dozens of forestry professionals, loggers, truckers and suppliers — most of the logger types belong to a member-owned cooperative, STIX (Sustainable Timber Inventory Exchange), but most folks refer them as “greennecks”;
- these greenneck teams have discovered that by ‘weeding the garden,’ they are enhancing the productivity of the most valuable timber county in the State;
- four new commercial enterprises are pumping out electrons and BTU’s, as well as healthy paychecks and reasonable profits — electrical generation; thermal (hot and chilled water) production; thermal distribution (think municipal water and sewer and heat/ AC); thermal installation and maintenance (the plumbers and electricians who hook your home or business to the district thermal system);
- new businesses have been drawn to Brattleboro due to the combination of stable, predictable energy costs, flat property taxes and the longstanding, award winning quality of life;
- profits are reinvested in the town’s energy infrastructure including state-of-the-art energy inventory system based on GIS (geographical information system), teams of experienced on-the-ground energy auditors, municipal-authored home loans for energy conservation and upgrades (think of your property tax bill paying for conservation measures) and “smart grid” technology where your computer-controlled appliances constantly “talk” to the power company to keep your freezer freezing for the fewest pennies each day;
- and last, but not least, a fair number of locals are kicking their addiction to imported oil while sticking to their love affair with the automobile; they’re recharging their new plugged-in hybrids by topping off their batteries with off-peak electricity at what amounts to \$1/ gallon for the gasoline equivalent.

You can stop reading here. Or you might want to see how the Brattleboro folks have been going about pulling off this fantasy.

Brattleboro Thermal Utility (BTU): Brief History (four pages available upon request)