

PRESS RELEASE

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Brattleboro Awarded District Energy Feasibility-study Grant

In early April, the Town of Brattleboro and Brattleboro Thermal Utility, Inc. (BTU) were jointly awarded a \$20,000 Vermont Clean Energy Development Fund grant for a district energy feasibility study. The Selectboard had previously approved a \$5,000 match for this effort, yielding a total budget of \$25,000 for the study.

The contract has now been issued by the Vermont Department of Public Service that allows the grant funds to be accessed, representing a potentially important step in Brattleboro's transition to a more sustainable mode of living.

BTU is a registered Vermont non-profit, whose mission is the creation of a community-controlled district energy system for the Town of Brattleboro, generating both electricity and thermal energy using wood biomass as a fuel, and ultimately heating a significant portion of the town's commercial, industrial, municipal, and residential buildings.

District energy systems produce hot water (or steam) centrally and distribute it to multiple buildings through a network of buried, insulated pipes. Buildings connected to the network use this thermal energy for space heating and domestic hot water service. The envisioned energy plant would also produce electricity to be sold to the public grid, using an efficient technology called combined heat and power (CHP), also known as cogeneration. The wood biomass fuel (in chip form) would consist exclusively of clean, untreated wood from sawmill waste, roadway and powerline maintenance, forestry slash, and other sources in this region.

District energy is a mature technology used for decades in Northern Europe to heat as much as half or more of all buildings in some countries, including private homes and apartments. Advocates believe it offers one of the most powerful ways for a community or town to reduce fossil fuel dependency, heating costs, and greenhouse gas emissions.

BTU's next step in pursuing its mission is to determine whether a district energy system is feasible in Brattleboro. In the fall of 2008, BTU issued a Request for Qualifications to seek qualified engineering firms to study this question, and selected a consortium of Waldron Engineering (of Exeter, NH) and NRG Thermal (of Minneapolis). Twelve other statements of qualifications were submitted, including two from Danish firms.

A feasibility analysis for a district energy system is complex. The most important factor to consider is whether there is enough potential heating demand from existing buildings to justify the capital and operating costs of a central plant. This involves inventorying and/or estimating the current heating system types and heating fuel usage of those buildings. Since most of Brattleboro is heated with oil, the higher the price of oil rises, the more economical a biomass CHP district energy system will become.

BTU is partnering with business groups and organizations to gather local heat demand data for the study. Building a Better Brattleboro (BaBB) and BTU are currently conducting an online survey of downtown building owners. This survey may then be extended to mixed-use areas north and south of the town center.

Subsequent steps in the feasibility study will include looking for logical sites for the plant; developing a layout for the piping infrastructure; estimating the most likely system size; and analyzing the various cost factors.

Small portions of the budget will also be allocated to Powersmith Farm of Guilford, whose extensive energy system expertise will enable it to serve as a liaison between BTU and Waldron Engineering; and to the Biomass Energy Resource Center (BERC) in Montpelier, who will apply their biomass expertise to a review of the study's findings and also assist with public outreach.

Brattleboro Thermal Utility is excited to be working on this project with our town, because while a biomass CHP district energy system will achieve significant reductions in Brattleboro's fossil fuel dependency and climate impacts, and lead to the retention of more money in the local economy, challenging trade-offs will have to be addressed. For example, wood chip supply will necessitate increased truck traffic, and wood chips will need to be sustainably sourced. Any potential air quality issues will also need to be closely evaluated.

For more information about BTU and district energy, visit:
www.brattleborothermalutility.com .

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