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FutureGen could be the economic future of east-central Illinois, and the Illinois coal industry



Written by Ned Jenison

Tue, 25 Apr 2006

Marshall considered as possible site of FutureGen

MARSHALL, Ill. – The future never looked brighter for Clark County than the possibility of a billion dollar energy -generating plant that could land in cornfields northeast of the city.

That is the optimistic outlook if a site offered without cost to the state makes the first and ultimately final cut for location of the FutureGen coal-fueled and zero emission power plant.

And that was the message presented to a Clark county audience which filled the St. Mary's Parish Center auditorium Monday night.

City and state officials explained details of the FutureGen project, first announced by President Bush in 2003 and now moving toward the siting process.

FutureGen is a pilot plant that may become the model for the ability to use Illinois - and the nation's - abundant coal reserves to generate electricity without any harmful atmospheric discharges.

This first plant will be a government-industry cost-sharing development managed by the FutureGen Industrial Alliance, whose members are among the largest coal producers and energy generators in the world.

And Clark County happens to occupy one of the best strategic locations that meets the extensive specifications established by the Alliance.

Marshall Mayor Ken Smith reviewed this criteria before introducing a panel to elaborate on the construction and operation of the plant.

Three essential requirements are abundant water, available land, and suitable underground geology which will cap the storage of carbon dioxide generated in the coal-gasification process.

The mayor read a letter from prominent businessman and landowner Gerald Forsythe pledging the gift of the site to the government, bringing a round of applause from the audience. "Unlimited" water is available through the Clark-Edgar Rural Water District from a well field in the Wabash aquifer.

The suitable underground geology is some of the best in the country, as described by Hannes Leetaru, petroleum geologist with the Illinois State Geological Survey and recognized as a leading national expert in his field.

The proposed site is adjacent to the CSX railroad, close to natural gas pipeline supplies, and within four miles of a major high-voltage transmission line on the Indiana border, Smith added.

The timeline for actual plant construction is several years ahead with plant operation by about 2011 or later. However Illinois must submit its proposed sites to the U. S. Department of Energy by May 4.

Earlier this month the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity announced for "finalist" sites near Tuscola, Effingham, Mattoon and Marshall - all located above the same geological formation that would "cap" the storage of carbon dioxide. Monday night was the final public information meetings for the four locations, with hearings at Marshall and Mattoon.

State officials will nominate one or more of these four sites. They will be in competition with about 20 other "finalist:" sites in other states including Texas, Ohio, and West Virginia.

Although the emphasis was on the Clark County site, Smith emphasized "We are not in competition with the others (in Illinois). We will support whichever sites the state picks, since any one will be good for this region, and good for Illinois."

Warren Ripley, the chief operating officer for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, expressed the state's excitement about the opportunity site FutureGen. "This project can go a long way to help the U.S. achieve energy independence,"

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he pointed out.

State Rep. Roger Eddy, who is a member of the Illinois Coal Coalition, read a letter of support from Congressman John Shimkus (R-Collinsville). He stated the key benefit of FutureGen technology is to "ensure that our children and their children will have the same abundant energy we enjoy"

Bill Hoback from the DCEO Office of Coal Development presented the technical and operational description of the project.

This is a federal research program with international implications," he said, "a billion dollar public-private partnership."

The total capital cost is estimated at \$600 million and will provide 1,300 construction jobs and 150 operating employees. However the indirect benefits will reach the billion dollar economic impact, he predicted.

When in operation the plant would consume up to a million tons of coal each year, and the potential use of some of the excess carbon dioxide could improve oil well and methane recovery in the region, he added.

Coal gasification technology is not new, pointed out John Mead from the Southern Illinois University's Coal Research Center. It has been used in Europe for many years, and Mead presented slides of generating plants including one in Tampa, Fla., and the relatively new Wabash River coal gasification project just north of Terre Haute.

What is new to this project, he said, is the generation of hydrogen as a byproduct for commercial use, and the injection of the carbon dioxide underground which allows no atmospheric pollution. Present coal-fired power generation is one of the major contributors of carbon dioxide which many scientists attribute to the "greenhouse effect" for global climate warming.

"For the first time in history, we will be using coal pollution free," he said.

Also speaking were Ronald Swager, FutureGen project coordinator for DCEO, and Brandon Seitz from the Indiana Security & Energy Department. Indiana has joined with Illinois to sponsor the site selection, recognizing the economic benefit to the entire coal basin. Joining the DCEO staff for the meeting was Todd Lee, East-Central Illinois regional manager.

Julia Bounds, Marshall economic development director, organized the public meeting, and introduced Mayor Smith who served as master of ceremonies. Bob Colvin of Francis Associates, civil engineering firm, and PEDCO president in Paris, worked with Marshall officials to prepare the site application.

Clark County Board chairman Bill Weaver also was present, and members of the county board and city council were introduced.

A public question and comment session concluded the meeting and indicated unanimous support with statements from local industry, the construction trades, utility companies, the railroad and members of the public. A letter of support also was read from John Thompson, director of the Coal Transition Project for the U. S. Clean Air Task Force.

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