

Hydroelectric generator gets go-ahead in Bennington

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BENNINGTON — The town received permits for its proposed hydroelectric generator last week, leaving staff encouraged the project could be completed this year but discouraged about renewable energy projects in Vermont.

On Wednesday, the Vermont Public Service Board issued a certificate of public good for the project. However, local officials said the amount of time needed to obtain permits, the number of parties involved and the confusing process would likely discourage development of renewable energy projects.

"Most projects when you get it into the engineer's hands, within a couple of months you have a finished project ready to go. With this, it seemed like there was a lot of chasing of loose ends. ... There are a lot of people, a lot of different agencies involved. It kinda got confusing at times," said Bennington's Water Resources Superintendent Terrance Morse.

For instance, the town needed an "Exemption for Small Conduit Hydroelectric" from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, a waiver from the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation and comments from Central Vermont Public Service. The process to obtain the permits began in August 2007.

The town plans to put a small hydroelectric generator in an existing inline conduit that feeds water from Bolles Brook into its municipal water treatment facility in Woodford.

A feasibility study indicates the generator would produce up to 140,000 kilowatt hours a year. Town officials hope it will provide up to half the power needed to power the water treatment plant.

In August 2007, Bennington received a \$63,000 grant from the Vermont Department of Public Service's Clean Energy Development Fund for the project. "In order to access the grant, we had to get a certificate of public good. Before we could get a certificate of public good, we had to get a FERC exemption. ... This is part of the reason why there isn't any hydroelectric development because it's so difficult and we don't know who to go to," said Bennington Economic and Community Development Director Scott Murphy.

Murphy said the federal exemption took almost six months to be approved even with the town asking Vermont's congressional delegation to facilitate the process.

Lori Barg, founder and chief executive of Community Hydro of Plainfield, suggested the project to Bennington and her company was later hired to help the town get through the regulatory process. Without Barg, Murphy said he didn't know if the town would have ever gotten its permits.

Barg told Murphy she believed Bennington's was the first permitted hydroelectric project in Vermont since 1985. "This project's been like a trailblazer for us and for the rest of the state. We've had calls from other communities in the state trying to figure out how they go about it," Murphy said.

At an event in Brattleboro on Sunday, Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., and environmental activist Bill McKibben said they understood the concerns about the permit process for renewable energy projects. "You have to understand, we're coming out of eight dark years with the Bush administration in terms of the environment. So any good ideas were discouraged, any positive ideas were slowed down. ... We believe there will be significant changes," Sanders said.

McKibben pointed the finger at Gov. James Douglas. "Vermont has coasted on its environmental reputation for years and years and years and the current governor hasn't done a darn thing to help in any of these areas," he said.

Catherine Gjessing, an attorney with the Agency of Natural Resources' Department of Environmental Conservation, said the state had tried to work with developers and coordinate the permitting process through actions like offering a site visit followed by a letter about what might be required to install a hydroelectric project in that site. However, during a meeting with stakeholders in hydroelectric generation and state agencies last year, the difficulty of the federal process was a common theme, Gjessing said.

Morse and Murphy said the town was hoping to have the hydroelectric generator running by the spring.

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