

Land commission wants more ethanol answers

Project can't proceed without approval to remove agricultural land

By CHRISTIANA WIENS

Free Press staff writer

Agricultural Land Reserve commissioners say they won't exclude land needed to build a \$200 million ethanol plant in Prince George until they get more answers.

Commissioners were in town Thursday to hear an application from Birchwood Plaza to exclude 48.5 hectares directly north of the Rustad Mill in the BCR lands from the agricultural land reserve.

The plant would employ 180 people and turn wood chips to a clean-burning gasoline additive through a chemical distilling process and would be the first of its kind in North America. Ethanol is manufactured in Canada and the U.S. from wheat, corn or derivative of sugarcane. Wood-based ethanol has never been tested commercially, and technology developed by former UBC professor Dr. Leo Paszner has yet to be patented.

Newness of the project is a concern for commissioner Gus Horn.

"What assurances do we have on the technical and business side, that the business will survive in the long term to justify excluding land from the land reserve?" asks Mr. Horn.

He questions the need to remove the parcel, owned by Gordon Biddle and Dean Ward, from the agricultural reserve when other already industrial

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What unique attributes does this land have that in five or 10 years this will be doing what you say it will be doing?

Gus Horn

zoned land is ready and available in the city.

"Exclusion is a one-way door," says Mr. Horn. "What unique attributes does this land have that in five or 10 years this will be doing what you say it will be doing?"

Many of the questions could be answered in yet to be done engineering and feasibility studies, which would evaluate construction needs, traffic patterns and impact of the 10-hectare plant and same-sized storage facility. That study, however, could cost as much as \$500,000 and the project has yet to secure financing.

Between 30 to 50 per cent of the \$200

million needed to pay for the project is being solicited from independent sources, while the rest of the money would be raised from debt-financing. Birchwood has contacted a Vancouver investment firm, who is putting together a portfolio for investors and needs about \$5 million to get things off the ground.

Birchwood technical advisor Brian Currie is asking commissioners to consider greater economic and societal impacts in awarding the exclusion.

He argues the land, with its relatively poor class four soil, deep ravines and sloped land, is not suitable for farm land.

"Whatever benefits that would be coming from the plant exceeds the potential for maybe growing a crop of hay a year," says Mr. Currie. If the application is denied, he adds, the company will look for alternate land in the BCR site.

"It's not the end of the project," says Mr. Currie.

Land to the north and east of the property is still in the ALR, with owners saying hay fields are not viable and would be better utilized if their own land were out of the "agricultural land freeze."

The land commission is holding the application open for public input until June 8, and is expected to make a decision when they meet in mid-June or July.



Congratulations Loretta!

The parents of Loretta Margaret Dumont-Bouwmeester join her friends in Prince George in congratulating her completion of her LL.B degree at the University of Alberta. Loretta attended Sacred Heart School and has earned a BA from the U. of Manitoba and an MA from York University. She will commence her articling year in Yellowknife where her husband Duane has been appointed a Captain with Tindi Airlines.

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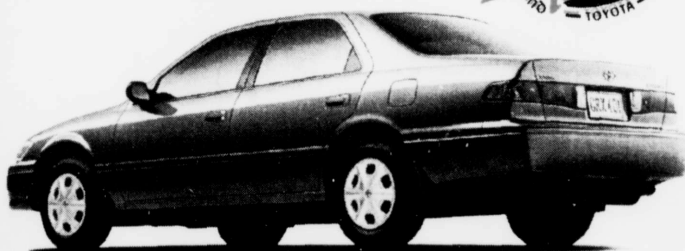
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