

The Taos News

Thursday, February 23, 2017

Group pushes renewable energy momentum for Enchanted Circle

By Charlene R. Johnson, For The Taos News



Members of Renewable Taos, from left, are Bob Bresnahan, Gary Ferguson, William M. Brown, John Gusdorf, and David Muñoz.

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William Brown of Renewable Taos Inc. presented a work-study session last week before the Taos County commissioners. The session was designed to solicit their support in creating a council to transform the Enchanted Circle area into a renewable energy environment.

The program included an overview of current regional and local energy systems, costs to citizens and potential methodologies for reaching 100 percent renewable energy for the area. Approximately 20 people were part of the discussion.

During a three-part presentation that was interspersed with question-and-answer breaks, Brown pointed out that the San Juan Generating Station near the Four Corners area, a coal-fired power plant, is the most significant source of power. The average annual demand for our area of 36 megawatts (MW) is transmitted across 200 miles of transmission lines to Taos County and parts of Río Arriba, Colfax and Mora counties. It serves about 37,000 people and 15,700 households.

The current power mix is 96 percent fossil fuels and 4 percent solar power, which is supplied by small residential and commercial solar arrays and a few larger arrays, such as the one near University of New Mexico-Taos. The electricity cost to citizens is \$38 million per year. Texas supplies New Mexico with propane at a cost of \$12.4 million annually, and natural gas costs \$9.2 million, Brown said. Gasoline and diesel fuels are provided from several transnational companies, costing between \$34 million and \$55 million each year. Altogether, Taosños pay about \$100 million annually, most of which flows out of the state. Renewable Taos (RT) proposes keeping more of these dollars in our state and local areas, creating more local jobs and using clean energy.

In 2016, Guzman Renewable Energy Partners became the wholesale electricity provider for the Taos area, replacing Tri-State Generation and Transmission. The president and other officials of Guzman met with Renewable Taos before the work-study meeting to discuss renewable energy goals. “Guzman Energy doesn’t build power plants,” Brown said. “They scan the western grid for the best prices, then buy and sell energy resources across the grid and route them to customers.”

The western grid spreads across 14 states and two Canadian provinces, supplying power mainly to California. New Mexico currently sends 40

percent of its electricity and 90 percent of the natural gas it mines to California. Because California law mandates transitioning to renewable energy soon, the state wants to end its coal contracts and find renewables. Kit Carson Electric Co-op (KCEC), another partner in this concept, purchases the wholesale power from Guzman and distributes it throughout the area as needed. KCEC's new plan, which is a foundation for obtaining 100 percent renewables, proposes building 31 solar arrays at 1 MW each from 2017 to 2022. KCEC targets include: 100 percent solar electricity during summer daylight hours by 2023 and more stable and lower prices without frequent rate hikes.

From 2013 through 2014, Renewable Taos approached every government in the Enchanted Circle, requesting signatures for a joint resolution on renewable energy. It was unanimously adopted by Taos County, town of Taos, Questa, Red River, Eagle Nest, Angel Fire, Taos Ski Valley, Taos Municipal Schools, KCEC and the Intergovernmental Council of the Enchanted Circle.

Next steps

What would it take to produce 200 MW of electricity – the amount necessary to offset our current fossil fuel demands – from 100 percent renewable energy? The first step could be to use more electricity. This would reduce the demand for propane, natural gas and vehicular fuels purchased from out of state. If heating, cooling and cooking could be electrical and more people drove electric vehicles, reliance on fossil fuels would be cut. Renewable Taos suggests that Taos County and other local governments lead by example by changing to an electric fleet as their vehicles are replaced.

Another major step includes creating solar installations, perhaps via two swaths – 1 square mile each – of unoccupied land west of the Río Grande Gorge and very near transmission lines. Guzman and KCEC also want to purchase an existing (but unused) 345-kilovolt line from Tri-State to carry renewable energy rather than coal-fired power to the western grid. A third

step includes purchasing wind power from the eastern portion of New Mexico, where wind farms are already in place. These things would result in price stability, lower rates, income from selling excess generation to the grid and cleaner energy, with the hopes of equaling a cleaner environment. “We have some of the best solar resources in the country,” Brown said. The overall goal of the discussion was to put together a regional council to assist in the renewable energy transition. “We hope to remove policy obstacles and to craft a marketing plan based on a renewable energy economy, made up of regional governments, hopefully led by this commission,” Brown said.

Some concerns were raised, both by commissioners and those from the floor, but many also praised the concept. The greatest concern was about how it would be paid for.

Bob Bresnahan, a member of both Renewable Taos and KCEC, said, “The KCEC solar plan calls for creating enough solar to generate all of our electricity needs here by 2022. We have the financing for the first six to seven projects, which will take place this year. We intend to complete around 2022 with a build-out at the back end since solar prices and battery storage systems are dropping dramatically in price. Right now, solar arrays are about 4.8 cents per kilowatt hour, and we’re confident that will be 2.4 cents in a couple of years.”

Bresnahan added that \$100 million a year translates into \$2 billion over the next 20 years. Those could be attractive figures to investors. Once it becomes known that the land is available, transmission lines are in place and a politically friendly county environment and interested people are involved, they’ll theoretically be knocking at the door.

“Attracting a developer won’t be the hardest part of this whole deal,” said Gabriel Romero, a county commissioner.

It was agreed that the proposal for a Regional Council on Renewable Energy would be taken up by the commission in March – after the legal department has a chance to review it.

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