

Tuesday, November 16, 2004

Clean energy urged for Worcester

Costlier option touted

By John J. Monahan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
jmonahan@telegram.com

WORCESTER— The Regional Environmental Council last night laid out an ambitious plan to get residents, businesses and the city government to begin purchasing part of their electrical power from clean energy sources, by persuading them the benefits outweigh the marginally higher prices they would pay on monthly electric bills.

At the local organization's annual meeting, coordinators and partners in the clean energy project, which is funded by the Massachusetts Technology Council, said the option to buy part of the electricity used in the city from alternative clean energy is already available to customers through Massachusetts Electric.

The challenge, said project coordinator Carissa Williams, will be to relay the long-term advantages — such as breaking the region's reliance on foreign oil and reducing air pollution that causes health problems — in a way that makes choosing cleaner energy convincing.

She said the group will have its first crack at persuading city officials at a meeting scheduled with Mayor Timothy P. Murray on Friday. Besides urging the city to lead the way by taking one of several clean power options, the organization also hopes to persuade as many as 500 local businesses to participate by next spring's Earth Day.

Richard Clapp, an epidemiologist and expert on community and workplace health risks from pollution, was among speakers at the meeting who listed reasons people should begin using clean energy.

He cited studies that have shown a correlation between child respiratory illnesses — including asthma attacks — with particulate emissions from power plants, motor vehicles and industry. He added that emissions from conventional fossil fuel power plants are a major contributor to global warming and the economic and health impacts forecast in global warming models.

“We have to get off this fossil fuel diet, here in Worcester and around the world. There is nothing more urgent than this in terms of environmental health in this century,” Mr. Clapp said. Climate change from fossil fuel emissions will increase deaths from heat waves, air pollution, and a shift of tropical diseases into northern climates.

“We have to focus now on what to do about it,” he said, adding that solutions do not lie in schemes to offset carbon emissions from fossil fuels by planting trees in other

countries — referred to as emissions trading — or greater use of nuclear power, which he called a dangerous technology.

Cynthia Luppi, of the grass-roots organization Clean Water Action, which is partnering with the Regional Environmental Council on the project, said only two other cities in New England have opted for the clean energy options for their electrical use, New Haven, Conn., and the small town of Portland, Conn.

She said residents and officials in Worcester have pioneered many “common sense” environmental solutions in the past, including its trend-setting startup of curbside recycling in the mid-1990s that became a model for communities around the state.

Because it is in the Massachusetts Electric service area, the city, businesses and residents are eligible to choose clean power options from the utility. She said the group will work to urge residents not only to contact Massachusetts Electric themselves to begin buying clean electricity from wind, biomass, hydro and solar power, but to contact city councilors and local officials to support a similar municipal move.

Under the program, she said the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative will match a portion of the added costs paid locally for clean energy, to invest in community clean energy and low-income energy projects in the city. By choosing a clean energy option on their electric bill, she said, “You are not only doing the right thing, but it will be a way of directly investing in Worcester’s clean energy future.”

People can view the four options offered to Massachusetts Electric customers at www.masselectric.com, or can get more information about the local initiative by contacting Ms. Williams at (508) 799-9139 or carissa.lee@charter.net.

For typical residential customers, options vary from an additional \$4 to \$15 per month on their electric bill.

Ms. Williams said she believes she can make a case to the city to spend a small amount more on its electric bill by presenting the unseen costs of “dirty energy.” While clean energy allows people to live healthier lives, it also will prevent the risk of nuclear power plant disasters.

Continued dependence on “dirty energy,” she pointed out, results in as many as 340 premature deaths per year from power plant emissions statewide, an additional 710 heart attacks per year in the state, and as many as 8,000 asthma attacks.