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City Council looks at energy costs

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WORCESTER - Looking to rein in the city's skyrocketing energy costs, the City Council last night broached the idea of having energy audits done of all municipal buildings to determine where energy efficiencies and cost savings can be achieved.

In a related matter, the council also authorized the city administration to apply for an \$11,837 grant under the Clean Energy Choice matching grant program, so the city can hire a part-time energy coordinator. That person would be responsible for analyzing potential costs and economic benefits of incorporating green/clean energy technologies in new building and construction designs, as well as capital rehabilitation projects. City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said he wants to identify alternative energy technologies to fossil fuels that will reduce city costs in its new and existing buildings, and other energy conservation programs.

"This is a timely endeavor given the staggering increases the city faces with projected higher energy costs this winter," Mr. O'Brien said. "It will be critical for the city to identify these new clean and green energy technologies and lower overall consumption if we are to reduce Worcester's demand on fossil fuel energy consumption."

John P. Prankevicius, the city's chief financial officer, recently projected the city's total expenditures for natural gas, unleaded gasoline, diesel fuel and heating oil could increase by as much as \$800,000 to \$1 million this fiscal year because of recent spikes in energy costs. Those additional costs do not include the Worcester public schools.

Last night, Mr. Prankevicius emphasized his projections were based on energy prices that existed more than a week ago, on the heels of Hurricane Katrina. He said there are signs oil and gasoline prices have since begun to retreat. If that trend continues, he said, it would lower the city's overall energy cost increases to a range of about \$500,000 to \$800,000.

Mr. Prankevicius said the biggest added expense facing the city is for natural gas.

The city's fixed-rate contract for natural gas expires Oct. 31. The current contract price per British Thermal Unit is 68 cents. However, the market price per BTU for natural gas is now up to \$1.30. Mr. Prankevicius said the 90 percent increase translates into an additional \$360,000 in natural gas heating expenses for nonschool municipal departments this fiscal year.

That figure does not include the DPW water and sewer divisions, Green Hill Golf Course or Worcester Regional Airport, which operate on enterprise accounts and have budgets funded by revenues they take in. The natural gas costs for those operations could go up by a combined total of \$150,000.

District 1 Councilor Thomas P. White said the spike in energy costs should persuade city officials to have energy audits done of all municipal buildings. He suggested the city hire a consultant to do the audits or approach Worcester Polytechnic Institute about having some students do it as a project.

The councilor also called for a review of the city's vehicle fleet to determine if any existing vehicles can be replaced by ones utilizing hybrid technologies, where economically feasible.

"We need someone to come into every municipal building and every school building, and take a look at the whole system from the roof down, to find out where we are wasting energy and what can be done to save money," Mr. White said. "Little steps can mean a lot."

Councilor-at-Large Juan A. Gomez said the city may not have to spend any money to have an energy audit done. He said the electric and natural gas companies often provide that service to its customers at no charge.

He suggested the city contact the utilities about doing the energy audits.

The grant being sought for the part-time energy coordinator position comes from a program being administered by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. For every dollar Massachusetts Electric Co. customers in Worcester spend on Clean Energy, the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative puts up to \$1 into a community fund, which is then available for the city to spend on projects that promote renewable energy.

Peggy Middaugh, executive director of the Regional Environmental Council, said her group is pleased to collaborate with the city in its efforts to pursue clean, renewable energy options that will provide for a healthier environment and save money.

She said the Regional Environmental Council with its partners, Clean Water Action and Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light, has been promoting Clean Energy Choice, which provides Massachusetts Electric customers the choice of purchasing electricity from renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar.

"Worcester is a large city with a complex mix of energy uses," Ms. Middaugh said. "This is the perfect time to set up a task force, which includes a mix of expertise and experience, to help us make the most prudent choices on how to spend our renewable energy money."