

Vermont capital residents OK wood-heating system

June 15 2011, By JOHN CURRAN , Associated Press

(AP) -- Vermont's capital city is going ahead with a plan to expand state government's wood-fired heating system into city schools and government buildings.

Montpelier voters approved the plan Tuesday, saying yes to a \$2.75 million bond issue to help finance a \$20 million biomass project that would hook up City Hall, the police and fire stations and two schools to the wood chip-burning system that's been heating the Statehouse and other state buildings for more than 20 years.

The vote was 963 in favor, 609 against.

So-called biomass heating plants - some public, some private - already exist in St. Paul, Minn., Seattle, and Concord, N.H., while a handful of other municipalities are exploring the idea, including at least five in Vermont.

The technology has gained favor with the rise of [oil prices](#) and concerns about [climate change](#). Supporters say burning wood, wood chips or other [plant matter](#) would reduce costs, [air pollution](#) and reliance on foreign oil.

Critics, meanwhile, note that some studies - including one last year by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences in Massachusetts - have found that wood-burning [power plants](#) emit more [greenhouse gases](#) than coal.

"It's one more thing that's helpful with our big problem, which is that we're running out of liquid sources of petroleum and it's controlled by people in foreign countries that don't particularly like us, and it's expensive," said William Schlesinger, president of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies. "The idea of trying this, seeing if it works, recognizing that it won't be the only solution to the problem, is a great idea."

In February, the Millbrook, N.Y.,-based nonprofit issued a report concluding that [forest biomass](#) could replace up to 25 percent of the liquid fossil fuel now used for industrial and commercial heating in the Northeast.

But it warned that fuel could be a problem, with forest biomass resources limited in some regions and vulnerable to a sudden rush that would degrade forests.

In Vermont, it would seem like a natural. Long, cold winters, vast expanses of forests and a deep-seated environmental ethic were among the factors that persuaded Montpelier voters to give it a chance.

"I think it's important for the city to try to get off of using heating oil," said Shawn White, 43, who voted yes Tuesday. "I like the idea of using wood chips and saving the city money."

Most of the financing wouldn't fall only to city taxpayers. The expansion of the state's system would be paid for with an \$8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy, \$7 million from the state, \$1 million from the Vermont Clean Energy Fund and money from the city bond issue approved Tuesday.

The money would go to replacing the state's World War II-era boiler plant, which was retrofitted in the 1980s to burn [wood chips](#).

Eventually, downtown businesses could be offered the opportunity to hook up to it, according to city officials.

Still, there are concerns - about how it would work, whether it would cost taxpayers more and whether the money might be better spent on more immediate problems, like pothole pocked roads. Opponents erected lawn signs reading "Heat Bond No! Fix Our Streets," tapping into residents' fiscal worries.

"We don't have the money," said Marie Hamel, 75, who voted no. "I'm not sure Montpelier's handled the money we let them have that well. And this is for downtown. Us up in the hills, all we will have to do is pay. And pay and pay and pay."

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