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Plans emerge for \$30 million energy technology and research building at UAF

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Photo by [Eric Engman](#)

FAIRBANKS — Education leaders look to be sharpening their focus on energy research, a move spearheaded by tentative plans to build a 31,000-square-foot building dedicated to energy research — everything from wind and hydrogen to coal — at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The plan is on the fast-track. If it happens, it would meet a demand for more space for energy research and testing — a need previously limited in discussion to the context of a separate project, a proposed expansion of the university’s growing engineering programs.

University leaders are talking of building the \$30 million center, which would house the 1-year-old Alaska Center for Energy and Power, during the next two summers.

The plan — to sell bonds for half the proposed building and get the rest of the money through a state grant — is included in a short list of construction projects pitched early this winter by the university’s board of regents.

The board also is seeking a separate five-year state grant that would partner the energy center with the state-run Alaska Energy Authority on state-proposed research projects.

UAF chancellor Brian Rogers said a new energy technology-focused building would follow up on pledges to help the state dramatically expand its use of renewable energy. Gov. Sarah Palin underscored that goal last week by announcing she wants half the state’s electricity to come from renewable sources by 2025.

“Energy issues were already there, (as was) the need for more space” for research and testing, Rogers said of the school’s decision last year to create the Center for Energy and Power. “I think it became more acute as energy issues came to the fore.”

Researchers at the energy center work in cramped quarters inside a modular building a stone's throw from the campus' coal power plant. The center is used to investigate and develop energy projects for use across the state, such as analyzing hybrid wind-diesel power systems that could reduce rural communities' reliance on diesel.

Gwen Holdmann, the center's organizational director, said interest from private and public clients has grown significantly since the center's founding, which highlights the need for more testing and research space.

The university's proposed construction budget, which has been forwarded to the Alaska Legislature for consideration, incorporates the proposed energy building alongside another, long-discussed proposal for a new life sciences-focused research and instruction facility. The energy proposal falls under the classification of "planning and design" in the budget, although university leaders say the combined \$30 million request would cover construction costs as well.

Rogers said the plan is to build the center to have a high energy-efficiency rating and to keep operating costs as low as possible.

While many of the university's research centers sit farther west on campus, he noted the proposed center's site — right next to the university's eastern entrance — will make it easy for the center to feed the campus power grid with energy produced during testing and demonstration projects.