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Energy center, borough study amount of Fairbanks greenhouse gas emissions

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FAIRBANKS — The University of Alaska Fairbanks is crunching numbers to study how much greenhouse gas we emit.

The university's Alaska Center for Energy and Power is conducting the study using a \$20,000 grant from the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

The work will serve as a baseline document needed to responsibly advance a proposed coal-and-biomass-to-fuel project, borough Mayor Jim Whitaker said. Whitaker said organizers are committed to reducing the community's aggregate emissions through that proposed project and its capacity for spinoff energy and heat generation.

Gwen Holdmann, an energy specialist leading the study for the university, said her team is working with the Environmental Protection Agency and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. She said the work focuses on all major greenhouse gas-emitting sources, including electrical generation, home and commercial space heating and transportation.

"In order to be able to show that we can reduce (emissions) in the borough, we first have to be able to show what they are," she said.

The work could be wrapped up in a month and will be summarized in a formal report, she said.

Money for the study comes from a \$1.3 million Emergency Energy Program set up by the Borough Assembly this spring to combat skyrocketing energy prices. The study is one leg of a bigger look at energy issues, one focused largely on following up on a task force's recommendation last year to pursue the coal-and-biomass-to-energy plant.

Whitaker, who is more than halfway through his second term in office, has pledged to update the assembly regularly on spending under the program, which is exempt from local public-spending rules. He has compared the economic impact of rising energy prices to that of the hypothetical closure of a major military base.

Whitaker said Thursday that decisions involved with shifting an entire community's energy policy while reducing carbon emissions were "generational" and require public investment at more than one or two spots.

"Our design criteria from the beginning was we must reduce carbon emissions," he said of the proposed energy plant. "You can't snap your fingers and do it. You've got to deal with what you have at the time."

The Fairbanks Economic Development Corp. used additional grants from the Energy Emergency Program and the state Legislature to strike a deal this spring with an energy consultant. The Canadian consultant, Hatch Ltd., is conducting a screening study for the proposed energy plant, which proponents think will cost around \$100 million or more to design and engineer and \$1 billion or more to build. The borough also spent \$250,000 under the program to match a grant from the Alaska Housing Finance Corp. to open a downtown office aimed at helping homeowners find their way through government-offered household energy-efficiency programs.

Whitaker said the borough also is hoping to work with financial analyst Greengate LLC to both line up financing options for the proposed energy plant and to analyze the financial situation facing the Flint Hills oil refinery, which owners are thinking of restructuring.

The borough also spent money under the program, according to Whitaker, on:

- A trip by Whitaker, city Mayor Terry Strle and development corporation chief Jim Dodson to meet state leaders in Anchorage;
- A contract with federal lobbying firm BlueWater Strategies, which is working with the departments of defense and energy and the state's congressional delegation on the energy issue.