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Hydrogen power park proposal gets early nod

Kimberly Wear The Times-Standard
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EUREKA -- The City Council gave a conceptual nod Tuesday to a hydrogen power park proposed by the Schatz Energy Research Center, passing a resolution in support of the project which would convert landfill gas into energy.

The city has been asked to help find a 2-acre site for the first-of-its-kind demonstration facility that would produce electricity, heat and hydrogen while also bringing international attention to Eureka and the prospect of potential grant funding, according to supporters.

Peter Lehman, director of the Schatz Energy Research Center at Humboldt State University, said methane gas from the Cummings Road landfill can be harnessed using clean technology.

"This is a local resource that right now we waste," he said.

Lehman said the power park idea comes from a student-designed entry in an international National Hydrogen Association contest. They won the grand prize. He said the facility would "put Eureka on the map."

Lehman said PG&E has expressed interest in building a pipeline to take the gas from the landfill to the facility and Chevron is co-funding a feasibility study on the project.

Councilman Chris Kerrigan and several council members voiced support for exploring alternative energy sources.

"As we look to the future, this potential project has some major, major benefits to the city and its economy," he said.

While two speakers supported the project, two others urged caution.

"If you have enough money you can build something that works, but is not practical in the real world," said Eureka resident Thomas Stewart.

Councilwoman Mary Beth Wolford said it will be important to work with the landfill's neighbors to address concerns as the project moves along.

In other business, the City Council voted to hire a consultant to create a Sequoia Park Zoo master plan, which would provide a blueprint for the zoo's future and be a major step in addressing concerns raised by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association.

The AZA will review the zoo's accreditation renewal in one year.

Council members also took a glance at the mid-year budget, which saw general fund appropriations increase by about \$120,00 due mainly to personnel changes. While reserve levels were lower than the city tries to keep at an estimated \$1.5 million, a five-year forecast indicates the Eureka should be able to meet the 60-days operating budget mark by 2010, staff said.

Also on the agenda were recommendations for zoning changes on the west side of Eureka compiled by a citizens committee formed by Wolford to address crime issues in the neighborhood.

Several of the recommendations will go before the Planning Commission for review, including "good neighbor" guidelines to be implemented through conditional use permits, the lowering of housing density in some portions of the west side and creating a historic district for the Clark District.

The city's Community Development Department is scheduled to prepare a draft ordinance on the historic district proposal, which would go before the Planning Commission and the City Council in a series of public meetings.

Another idea was to encourage higher density housing in Old Town and consider having less parking requirements. The council voted to have staff provide project updates on several of the proposals in the next three to six months.

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