

Biomass proposal outlined

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, July 9, 2014 10:00 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County took one small step toward a greener future Tuesday when the board of supervisors voted to support three of its members in a biomass energy project.

Jefferson County Board of Supervisors members Walt Christensen, Greg David and Mike Kelly have created a team for the Climate Quest Challenge, a contest sponsored by University of Wisconsin-Madison institutions that will award grant money for creative ideas that mitigate climate change.

Their idea is to convert Jefferson County governmental buildings to utilize biomass energy, which can be grown locally and harvested sustainably for long-term benefit.

“What we’re hoping to get out of this is at least a plan,” David said during a presentation to the board at its monthly meeting Tuesday.

He noted that even if their proposal is not funded, the team would come away from the experience ready to submit the idea for other grant applications.

“We might get funding,” he added.

Biomass is plant material that is harvested for fuel and burned to create energy to heat or cool buildings. The supervisors would like to plant and harvest the materials locally on public and private lands, and use the energy to heat and cool the county’s campus.

Their proposal already has been refined several times since the Climate Quest Challenge began in March, and was selected as one of 24 of the 85 initial proposals to move forward into the second round of the competition.

If selected as one of the winners in December, they could receive significant grant awards to put the plan into action.

Although they have been working on the proposal for some time, the three supervisors came before the full board Tuesday seeking a resolution of support to lend their project an extra air of credibility, showing that the county would support the project were it funded.

While some supervisors expressed having their doubts, the reaction from the board overall was positive. Supervisor George Jaeckel brought up concerns about the insects that come with planting the particular species of trees the trio is proposing, including boxelder, and the public perception that goes with harvesting a vast amount of trees at one time.

“I’ll support it at heart, but I don’t want to see a lot of our tax money spent on this,” Jaeckel said.

David responded by saying at this point, no tax dollars will go toward the project, and any future spending would need to be approved by the board.

“We’re not suggesting we spend a dime of Jefferson County’s money,” David said. “We need to find out what the

answers are to concerns like yours.”

Supervisor Dick Schultz said that to him, the resolution was a no-brainer, noting that earlier, the board had discussed possibly using biomass at a smaller county facility as an experiment.

“All this does is say, ‘Let’s look into this.’ This alternative is sitting back and continuing to be dependent on fossil fuels,” Schultz said. “I do think this is an area where this county can be a leader.”

The resolution to give the county’s support to the biomass-exploration project passed on a unanimous voice vote. Five supervisors, Al Counsell, Dwayne Morris, James Braugher, Matthew Foelker and Carlton Zentner, were absent.

The next review and selection for the final round of the competition occurs in September, and the final projects to receive funding will be chosen in December 2014.

Also on Tuesday, the board approved the purchase of a handicapped-accessible fishing platform to be constructed on Blackhawk Island.

The pier will be located on the site of Jefferson County’s first flood-mitigation project, just upstream from Lake Koshkonong.

The board previously had approved a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to construct the pier and related parking facilities, which leaves the county contributing 20 percent of the project’s costs, while the DNR will contribute 80 percent.

Bids received for the project put the cost of the pier, which will be purchased from V.W. Docks in Spirit Lake, Iowa, at \$31,514. The total project cost, including installation, is estimated to be around \$44,000, of which the county’s portion of approximately \$8,800 will be provided through in-kind labor from Parks Department staff and existing available funds.

Also Tuesday, the board amended the county’s personnel rules to allow for some employees to receive step raises outside the standard pay progression on rare occasions to aid in employee retention.