

Energy bill promotes Alma effort

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The energy bill President Bush signed this week means that M and M Development, the developers of Alma's proposed energy park, can apply for funds and tax credits to help the project get going.

In fact, the part of the energy bill that deals with carbon sequestration seems designed specifically for the Great Lakes Energy Research Park.

The bill says that the Secretary of Energy "shall promote, to the maximum extent practicable, regional carbon sequestration partnerships to conduct geologic sequestration tests involving carbon dioxide injection, monitoring and mitigation" in a variety of settings, including operational and depleted oil and gas fields, deep saline formations and deep geologic systems containing basalt formations.

It also asks the Secretary to provide

information to the Environmental Protection Agency and others to support regulations for commercial scale sequestration operations that protect people and the environment.

No less that seven large scale sequestration tests are to be conducted. "Large scale" is defined as involving more than one million of tons of CO₂ annually or several million metric tons for a large number of years.

And those tests, the bill stated,

should be ones that would "facilitate the creation of an integrated system of capture, transportation and sequestration of carbon dioxide."

Preference should also be given to proposals from partnerships among industrial, academic and government entities. Developer Michael Sawruk has stated repeatedly that he wants Alma College to be a partner in the environmental aspects of the park.

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He has envisioned an energy park that would have at its core an integrated gas combined cycle coal plant with carbon sequestration. The CO₂ would then be injected into the ground and used to retrieve oil from abandoned wells.

This energy bill, said Sage Eastman, a spokesman for Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland, "supports exactly what's going on in Alma."

And Sawruk and his partner Michael Muckleroy could apply for funds and tax incentives from the literally hundreds of million of dollars coming from that bill over the next few years.

Camp has long supported Alma's proposed energy park but he didn't vote for this bill.

"To be honest, we knew it was going to pass," Eastman said, pointing out that Camp approved that part of the bill. He could not however, vote on a bill that "lumped in a new hardship on the Big Three automakers - they're having a hard enough time as it is - without any help from the government."

While U.S. Sen. Carl Levin did vote for the bill, Sen. Debbie Stabenow also did not.

Although President Bush has not yet signed the appropriations bill - called the omnibus spending bill - he is expected to sign it this week. Included in that bill is nearly \$500,000 for the energy park.

The IGCC coal plant and a proposed refinery and research facility are expected to cost upwards of \$2 billion, money which would come from private investors. That \$500,000 seems small in comparison but it is "extremely symbolic. It's tremendous. The federal government is saying this is a valid project for Michigan," Greater Gratiot Development Director Don Schurr said.

For his part, Alma City Manager Phil Moore said Wednesday's announcement gave the city a new level of excitement.

"You can just feel it downtown," he said. "People are happy. I feel (the park) is gaining momentum."