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City Council, mayor weigh in on benefits, drawbacks
Michael French - Staff Writer

MARIETTA - The city's bright red diesel fire trucks could turn a little green through the use of biofuels if the City Council likes the numbers.

Ward 4 City Councilman Van Pearlberg took a suggestion from some of his constituents to pursue biodiesel fuels in the city's 109-diesel vehicle fleet.

"It's better for the environment and better for the vehicles," Pearlberg said. "The cost factor is better. You're just changing a filter."

Ward 6 City Councilman Jim King said he thinks a switch to biodiesel is a good idea for the city.

"I'm glad we're doing this," he said, adding that if found to be economically feasible, biodiesel fuel would have a "significant" and "immediate" impact on Marietta's environmental quality.

King said the city is looking into a biodiesel called B20. B20 is 20 percent biodiesel, 80 percent traditional diesel and burns cleaner, with a 20 percent reduction in hydrocarbons.

Pearlberg said with little to no modifications needed to existing city diesel vehicles, the transition could be almost instant.

"In the long run, it is better for everybody concerned," he said.

King said benefits of biodiesel have the potential to go beyond environmental improvements. He said while the cost of the fuel is higher than standard diesel, use of the fuel can result in lowered maintenance costs for vehicles.

Ward 1 City Councilwoman Annette Lewis said anything that improves city air quality is worth investigating.

Ward 3 City Councilwoman Holly Walquist, the City Council's resident environmentalist, said she was glad Pearlberg suggested the fuel change.

"We've got to look for other alternatives," she said, adding that some research she looked at showed that the Keene, N.H., city fleet saved the city money by switching to biofuels, which resulted in cleaner air.

King said B20 has "high detergent action" for engines, keeping them cleaner and providing better gas mileage.

Tim Kemper, president and CEO of the Marietta branch of Desmet Ballestra, a global company specializing in the construction of biodiesel plants, said the price of biodiesel is \$3 per gallon with production costs coming in at \$2.45 per gallon.

Robert Thornton, operations manager at S.A. White Oil Co. in Marietta, said with fuel prices dropping throughout the winter, the price of traditional diesel is, for now, beating out biodiesel and sales of biodiesel by the company have fallen.

"We're probably doing half of what we were doing in 2006," he said.

Mayor Bill Dunaway said if use of biodiesel is found to be a cost-effective move for the city, he would support the switch in the interest of saving taxpayer money.

Ward 5 City Councilman Anthony Coleman said he wants to see more information on the cost effectiveness of biodiesel before forming an opinion.

"Is it cost efficient? Is it worth the city's time to look into it? I want to hear more about it," he said.

Ward 7 City Councilman Philip Goldstein said right now, it's not cost effective for Marietta.

"Once staff finds a viable economic alternative, I will be very supportive of using the alternative," he said. "So far, what staff has looked at has not been economically viable as an alternative to gasoline or diesel."

Goldstein said he had conducted discussions with Public Works Director Dan Conn, who told him that biofuel is approximately 80 cents more per gallon.

"That would equate to approximately \$115,000 more per year," he said. "Staff is looking to see if they can obtain (B20) at a lower price and an overall cost benefit analysis."

King said he believes the added costs might be absorbed by the savings at the vehicle maintenance level, but added more research will be done to determine the exact savings.

"It's a good move for the city to make," King said.

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