

EWEB urged to make new complex “greener”

By Jeff Wright, The Register-Guard, Published: March 17, 2008 12:00AM

In some towns, the local utility might hear grumbling about spending too many greenbacks to build a new operations complex.

In Eugene, the complaint from some is that the Eugene Water & Electric Board is not spending enough money to make its new operations complex sufficiently green.

Specifically, a number of concerned critics — including the city of Eugene's Sustainability Commission — have asked EWEB to reconsider its cost-cutting decision to forego solar photovoltaic panels on the roof of the operations complex it plans to build in west Eugene at Roosevelt Boulevard and Belt Line Road.

Urged on by member and Eugene City Councilor Alan Zelenka, the Sustainability Commission voted 7-4 to send a letter to EWEB urging it to include the panels.

Other advocates include Bob Cassidy, a retiree running for an EWEB seat this spring.

“This is what you want everybody else to do — why not do it yourself?” Cassidy asked EWEB commissioners at a meeting earlier this month. “It would be a nice thing to say: ‘Hey, we’re a sustainable city; we’ve got solar collectors on our utility buildings. ”

EWEB officials say that customers’ desire to see the panels — and a new state law that requires public agencies to devote at least 1.5 percent of their construction dollars to solar energy technology — could push the utility to add the panels, later if not sooner.

“It’s symbolically important for EWEB to lead the way (in renewable energy), and that includes having highly visible photovoltaic panels on our buildings,” EWEB President John Simpson said. “But we may see the building go up without them, and then add them later when funding is defined.”

EWEB’s five elected commissioners struggled for months to find a middle ground between those most concerned about cost and those keen on making sure the new complex is a leader in building sustainability.

The new complex will house EWEB’s electrical, water and engineering staffs, and include a two-story operations building, warehouse, fleet building and yard. EWEB’s administration buildings and steam plant will remain at its riverfront location east of downtown.

Eye on the budget

The board ultimately reduced the project’s cost from \$98 million to \$83.5 million, mostly by reducing the square footage of buildings and opting for concrete tilt and prefabricated construction materials instead of structural steel and concrete.

But savings were also found by eliminating such environmental features as green roofs and photovoltaic panels.

Even without those features, the complex should have enough environmental amenities to qualify for a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design gold rating, EWEB officials say.

The rating is based on criteria established by the U.S. Green Building Council.

For example, EWEB plans to include solar water heating, use passive-solar “natural daylighting” to reduce lighting costs, restore wetlands on the site, and create bioswales to treat stormwater. It also wants to install an “eco machine,” a series of tanks and biological systems that treat sanitary wastes on site, producing water that can be reused to flush toilets.

Board President Simpson said it’s hard to assess the depth of community sentiment to also include photovoltaic panels. “Eugene is lucky to have a high proportion of vocal environmental advocates, but I can’t tell if they represent the entire city,” he said. “I’m an environmentalist, but I’m also a fiscal conservative.”

Could go solar later

Maurie Denner, an interim school principal vying for the same EWEB seat as Cassidy, said he wonders if it makes better sense to wait until solar technology advances.

“The board has a huge responsibility to stay within the limits of the financing plan and to minimize as much as possible the total impact on ratepayers,” he said.

Denner and Simpson are among those who’ve said it may make sense to design the operations complex — with appropriate wiring, brackets and supports — so that panels can easily be added later.

EWEB has estimated it would cost about \$900,000 to include the panels — and the utility, unlike private homes or businesses, is not eligible for most of the state and federal tax credits available to those who install them.

Some, including Zelenka and Simpson, have floated the idea of a public-private partnership, where the private partner would own the solar panels and the power they generate, sell the power to EWEB, and reap the tax credit. EWEB's role would include maintaining the panels.

Zelenka contends it would cost EWEB ratepayers about \$1.50 a year to underwrite the cost of photovoltaic panels, or nothing at all if a public-private partnership were created.

Monthly bills will rise

EWEB, meanwhile, has estimated that financing for the entire operations complex would increase the average residential customer's total monthly bill, for electricity and water, by about \$2.75 to nearly \$104. That extra cost to ratepayers will be cut in half, officials say, once EWEB sells the existing operations complex's riverfront property and applies the proceeds to construction costs at the new site.

The other question mark for EWEB is how to satisfy the new state law requiring solar technology in new buildings. EWEB's plans to include passive-solar daylighting and solar water heating may or may not be enough to satisfy the requirement, spokesman Lance Robertson said.

It's also possible EWEB could add the panels if other costs come in below budget.

"We still have about seven months of design work, and then we'll have a much clearer idea of how close to the \$83.5 million (construction budget) we're going to come," Robertson said.

"We're probably three to four months away from making a final decision on whether to add back the photovoltaics."