

Seattle Steam switching from gas to wood fuel

BY BILL VIRGIN
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The earliest settlers of Seattle burned wood to keep themselves warm.

One of modern-day Seattle's biggest suppliers of heat plans to do the same.

Seattle Steam Co., which operates two plants that produce steam for heating downtown office buildings, hotels and hospitals, plans to replace a natural gas-fired boiler with one that uses recycled and "urban" wood as its fuel.

Stan Gent, president of Seattle Steam, said the company

hopes to have permits in hand for the \$18 million project, at its Western Avenue and Union Street plant, within a month. Construction could start shortly afterward, and be done by February 2007.

Gent says using wood instead of natural gas has several attractions. Natural gas prices have been volatile in recent months, and experts expect them to remain higher than historic levels. That's not a small concern for a company Gent says is the biggest single natural gas consumer in the state. Conversion could cut Seattle Steam's consumption of natural

gas by 60 percent.

"Gas is probably three times the cost of wood," Gent said. "Seattle Steam has an aggressive hedging program" to protect itself from high gas prices, "but wood is significantly below that."

Seattle Steam also is touting what it and city officials say are the environmental benefits of converting to wood from natural gas. The project was specifically included in the recent recommendations of Mayor Greg Nickels' Green Ribbon Commission on Climate Protection as a

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way to reduce the release of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming.

Burning wood actually will release more of those gases than burning natural gas, Gent says. But advocates of such a switch argue that over the full life cycle of the tree, the net release is zero, since the tree is absorbing and storing carbon dioxide while growing.

Seattle Steam was facing a major overhaul or replacement of the boiler anyway, Gent added.

The wood will come from crates, packaging material and tree trimmings. Rainier Wood Recyclers will reduce the wood to chips 3 inches or smaller.

Gent said Seattle Steam also is considering investing in a combined heat-power generation project for installation at its other plant, on Post Alley at Yesler Way. The company is considering submitting a proposal to Puget Sound Energy, which is soliciting proposals for additional generating capacity.

Seattle Steam, founded in 1893, distributes steam heat to 175 customers through 18 miles of pipeline. Customers include the Fairmont Olympic and Seattle Sheraton hotels and Harborview and Swedish medical centers.

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