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Proposed small-scale data center in Wrangell raises questions



(City and Borough of Wrangell photo)

By Larry Persily
Wrangell Sentinel

The town's economic development board, which advises the assembly, has raised several questions about a possible borough land lease for a California-based company to build and operate a small-scale data center.

The board voted 5-0 on Jan. 5 to recommend the assembly move forward with the lease for one or two acres at the former 6-Mile Mill property, but not until board members added several issues that they believe the assembly needs to consider.

Those include any water discharge from the data center, the potential for noise and light pollution, whether the borough would receive any sales tax revenues from the operation, and how would the data center's electricity demand could affect rates for other utility customers in town.

"We need to protect the current ratepayers," said Board Chair Bob Dalrymple.



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If the company, Greensparc, goes ahead with the project, its lease with the borough would spell out terms of power supply to the operation, Economic Development Department Director Kate Thomas told the advisory board.

Members of the public at the Jan. 5 meeting also asked about noise, light, water discharge, emissions and any impacts on electric rates.

“Greensparc needs to come to the community and help the community better understand,” Dalrymple said.

Board Member Jillian Privett offered a similar comment: “There needs to be more community input.” She added, “I think they have to have a little more due diligence in the town before they get a thumbs-up from me.”

The company is not proposing a large-scale data center for artificial intelligence computing, Thomas explained. “This is about a 10,000-square-foot building.”

“Our model is a lot different than Amazon or Google,” Sam Enokla, founder and CEO of Greensparc, said in a Jan. 9 interview with the Sentinel.

While the largest of the headline-grabbing data centers can consume more than 1,000 megawatts of power, the Greensparc proposal for Wrangell would be a fraction of that size. The cluster of computer servers to provide data storage and processing for customers would draw just 1 or 2 megawatts, Enoka said.

The company installed an even smaller data center in Cordova last year, about 10% to 20% the size of what it would put in Wrangell. “That was a walk-in closet,” Enoka said of the Cordova pilot project, which is Greensparc’s first and only data center.

The company’s business plan is to build small-scale data centers in rural communities with surplus renewable energy to sell. Cordova, like Wrangell, runs on hydroelectric power.

After installation of a third turbine, planned for next year, the Tyee Lake hydroelectric station that serves Wrangell and Petersburg will have the capacity to generate about 30 megawatts, a 50% boost from its current capacity.

Enoka, who was raised in North Pole, near Fairbanks, said Greensparc is looking to develop other sites in Alaska and the Lower 48, and wants to prove its concept in Alaska to show it can succeed in rural communities with excess green energy to sell.

Thomas told the economic development board that the company’s data center could generate “upward of \$1 million a year” in new revenue for Wrangell’s electric utility. The borough-owned utility expects to earn about \$4.75 million selling power this year.

In addition to negotiating a land lease at 6-Mile, constructing a building and installing servers and connections, the development schedule, Enoka said, would depend on the utility’s timeline to accommodate the new load.

There will be no water discharge from the operation, which would use a closed-loop cooling system to keep the servers from overheating, he said.

And there would be no emissions because the company does not plan to install any backup generators. Instead, Enoka said, they would install battery packs. “That buys us enough time for an orderly shutdown” if the power goes out.

“A little bit of an outage is not going to kill us.”

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A loss of fiber optic service to move data is not as easily solved, he said. Satellite backup is possible, but it would not provide the same capacity as a fiber optic line.

Separate from Greensparc's plans, the borough is looking at setting backup diesel generators at the 6-Mile site to serve proposed industrial users at the property, including a possible shipyard, and customers out the road, Thomas said.

The borough is talking with American Cruise Lines about buying the four Caterpillar diesels that powered the American Empress cruise ship. Tideline Construction is dismantling the ship for the cruise company, which plans to reuse the hull as a floating dock downtown for its ships that call on Wrangell.

The diesel units can each turn an 1,825-kilowatt generator, according to the ship's specifications.

Borough Manager Mason Villarma said Jan. 8 that officials are discussing the price for the generators with the cruise line.

- *This story originally appeared in the Wrangell Sentinel.*

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