

Buffalo News Editorial

End this Bad Idea

Jamestown power plan lacks support, board should drop the project

January 05, 2010

It is time for the Jamestown Board of Public Utilities to learn what “no” means.

First an analysis by some independent energy consultants reported that plans to graft some experimental “clean coal” technology onto an oversized and unnecessary power plant the board is determined to build stood to create some of the most expensive kilowatt hours to be found in these parts. Then Praxair, the corporation with the know-how behind the idea to remove the climate-changing carbon dioxide from that plant and store it in underground hollows, shifted its focus to another project in Michigan, where, the engineers said, the hollows are better.

Finally, early last month, the U. S. Department of Energy decided not to include the Jamestown project—or Praxair’s Michigan alternative—among those that are to receive billions in federal dollars intended to test various carbon-capture schemes.

Officials of the Jamestown board reportedly are poring over their documentation and awaiting a formal rejection letter from the DOE before deciding what to do next.

The answer should be simple: Drop the project.

From the beginning, it has been clear that the small city of Jamestown has no business going deeper into the expensive and potentially filthy power generation business. Most of its juice already comes from the pollution-free hydropower of the New York Power Authority, and the rest of its needs can clearly be met through a combination of purchases off the grid, conservation and, as the community grows, adoption of other renewable sources such as wind power.

The dream of turning its otherwise unnecessary coal-fired power plant into a shining example of a new way to burn America’s abundant coal without wrecking the world’s weather certainly sounds attractive. But, as the many critics of the plan have convincingly argued, it is less attractive than trying it out on a power plant that is already belching out tons of climate-changing gases.

If the carbon-capture technology doesn’t work, or if making it work is so expensive that nobody can afford to operate it, running the test on an existing power plant leaves us no worse off than we were before. If Jamestown builds a new plant only to find out that the carbon can’t be economically captured, then the city is left with a new coal-burning plant that it either has to operate in order to make back its investment, or shelve as a way of stanching the flow of money and the release of soon-to-be banned or heavily taxed carbon.

Two of the three carbon-capture experiments that the feds have agreed to fund are at existing power plants. None of them uses the same kind of technology that Praxair and Jamestown were eyeing for their project.

The mere fact that Jamestown didn't win any money in the last round of grants is not, in itself, any great shame. There were, as is often the case, more ideas than there was money. But the fact that nobody except the empire builders on the Jamestown board seems to think their "clean coal" project stands to turn out to be anything of the kind should, by now, have sunk in.

Drop the idea, before it costs the people of Jamestown any more money than it already has.