

Island Pond pellet plant seems at dead end

by *Paul Lefebvre* | February 14, 2011

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Editor's note: *Paul Lefebvre is a staff writer for the [Barton Chronicle](#), a weekly newspaper that covers Orleans County. This story first appeared in the [Chronicle](#) on Feb. 9, 2011.*



Rep. Peter Welch touring a proposed biomass facility in Island Pond. Photo courtesy of Peter Welch.

ISLAND POND — Plans to bring a pellet plant into the old Ethan Allen furniture factory appear to have come to a dead end.

The deadline for a \$1 million no-interest federal loan has passed; a House committee is trying to pass legislation authorizing the sale or lease of the John Boylan Airport to the plant's developer; selectmen have been left high and dry.

"We tried to get (the developer) to ask for an extension (of the federal grant deadline)," said Jerry Goupee. "All they had to do was sign their name."

The federal money would have allowed Vermont Biomass Energy Company to borrow \$1 million at zero interest for 10 years to build a wood pellet factory, [according to a statement](#) from the Agency for Commerce and Community Development.

Fran Azur, the developer of Vermont Biomass Energy, however, said he wasn't interested in

the loan.

Although the deadline for the grant has passed, the money is still available, according to Josh Hanford, director of the Vermont Community Development Program. The federally funded block grant has been awarded to the town, which in turn would loan it to a developer.

The grant was earmarked for the Island Pond pellet plant, according to Hanford, but unless its developer promptly asks for an extension to the deadline, he said the money "would be allocated to another worthy project."

In addition, the sale of the airport site, which Azur has said he needs for wood storage for the pellet factory, is now under review. Last week, a bill introduced by the House Committee on Institutions for the purpose of releasing "the state from its obligation to sell or lease the airport to certain parties."

Rep. Janice Peaslee of Guildhall, one of the six representatives from the Northeast Kingdom who sponsored the bill, said lawmakers are uncomfortable with what appears to be an open-ended offer to Azur.

From its inception, the project has had a rocky ride. Politics had been the plant's midwife right from the beginning, when the Newport-born entrepreneur said he would not go ahead with the project unless he had the approval of the townspeople.

Brighton residents gave him their support in spades on Town Meeting Day last year when they voted overwhelmingly to approve the sale of the Boylan Airport so it might serve as a log landing to furnish wood to the plant. Acquisition of the airport was seen as the final step in bringing the project to fruition, which would bring 34 factory jobs to the town.

The vote came after Mr. Azur said publicly that, without use of the airport as a log yard, the project to manufacture pellets at the former Ethan Allen factory would not be economically feasible.

The Legislature also approved a sale or lease of the airport to Azur's company, Vermont Biomass Energy, last year.

Over the summer the project appeared to be moving ahead. The company applied for an Act 250 permit for the plant in August amid announcements that a compromise was being fashioned that would allow the airport and log landing to coexist.

Soon afterward, however, prospects began to unravel. The company withdrew its Act 250 application, citing power problems to be worked out

Electric Co-op. Then company and state officials missed a meeting in October before the town's Development Review Board.

And then came Azur's announcement a few weeks later, saying his company was following the example of other investors by taking a "wait and :
over the results of the November elections before investing capital.

But the elections came and went and the plans still remained on hold, Goupee noted.

Town and state officials hoped the new year would breathe life into the project.

"No one wanted to close that door," noted Hanford.

Attempts to reach Azur and his public relations officer Steve Mason on Tuesday were unsuccessful.

*Posted in Energy & Environment | Tagged biomass, Brighton, Fran Azur, Guildhall, Island Pond, Janice Peaslee, Jerry Goupee, Vermont Biomass Energy Company, Ve:
Community Development Program, wood pellets | 4 Responses*

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