

GP council establishes Sustainability and Energy Action Committee for city

By Lisa Dunlap of the Daily Courier



A new committee has been established by the Grants Pass City Council to make recommendations about reducing the city's energy costs and its production of greenhouse-gas emissions while increasing energy resilience.

Seven members are expected to be appointed to the Sustainability and Energy Action Committee, approved during a meeting Wednesday.

"We would ask that we staff it with an energy efficiency specialist, somebody who is very good at data," said Jason Canady, director of public works, as he described the preferred qualifications for two of the positions.

"We would ideally like to get a solar energy technology specialist. ... Also somebody with solid waste and recycling experience, because that was an area that the plan identified that we didn't dig into a lot where there is some potential to save significant energy costs. We also believe that keeping a high school student on the committee is very beneficial to the committee, and then two members at large."

The motion passed by a vote of 4-3, with Councilor Brian DeLaGrange absent. The City Council split on whether membership on the committee should include a city residency requirement.

"I feel strongly that, if they are going to vote, they need to live in the city limits," said Councilor Joel King. He said non-voting ex-officio members could provide expertise if needed, but that only taxpayers should vote.

Councilor Rick Riker said that he wanted the committee to have knowledgeable members, even if that meant they come from outside the area, especially because the City Council will be the body making final decisions. Councilor Vanessa Ogier also said she didn't want requirements that would limit applicants.

King was joined by Rob Pell and Dwayne Yunker in voting against the resolution as presented, with Pell also specifying that he favored a county residency requirement.

Responding to a question from King, Canady said the solar energy technology specialist might have an economic interest in decisions, but that committee members would be expected to recuse themselves from voting on any matters in which they had vested interests.

King also noted that the action plan had been developed without consideration of costs, but that the committee should have a different mindset.

"I need the committee to know it is the policy of the council to have an economic viability that determines costs and benefits, not just benefits," he said.

The standing committee is likely to meet quarterly. It was recommended by the Sustainability and Energy Action Plan adopted May 17. It focused only on city actions and operations in addressing climate change and energy production and consumption.

That document had been developed by a 12-member task force formed in November 2021. Its members also received advice from consultants that included a science instructor with Rogue Community College, who is also a member of the Southern Oregon Climate Action Network, and two members of the Energy Trust of Oregon, which advises people on how to save money on utility costs. A representative with the office of U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley also participated.

New committee members will recommend ways that the city can implement the action plan, evaluate feasibility studies, monitor progress, gather citizen input and educate the community.

The action plan has five major goals. In addition to creating the standing committee, the goals include:

- Managing city energy costs to keep them within 30% of the 2021 costs.
- Reducing city greenhouse emissions to net zero by 2045.
- Developing energy resilience so that the city can withstand power grid failures or catastrophic disasters.
- Making future decisions with economic, environmental and social sustainability in mind.

To achieve the five goals, 14 projects have been suggested that range from smaller initiatives such as using more energy-efficient lighting in parks to larger projects such as converting brownfield areas at landfills into solar fields.

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