

Active local nonprofit board member Patty Zillian Eppinger shares her perspective on community organizations.



ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Biomass Plant Emissions Spark Debate

Central Mass. operators say energy source is clean

BY BRANDON BUTLER
Worcester Business Journal Staff Writer

Just over one year ago Munksjo Paper Co. in Fitchburg closed its factory and laid off 100 workers.

There was a glimmer of hope in the announcement, however.

The company had plans to build a biomass heat and electricity plant on its site, which would burn wood chips to produce electricity and heat for the factory's operations. The decrease in energy costs by producing power independently would allow the plant to reopen and possibly hire back its workers.

Reported Concerns

But a new study commissioned by the state's Department of Energy Resources is casting a somewhat critical eye on biomass power plants and questioning just how environmentally friendly they are.

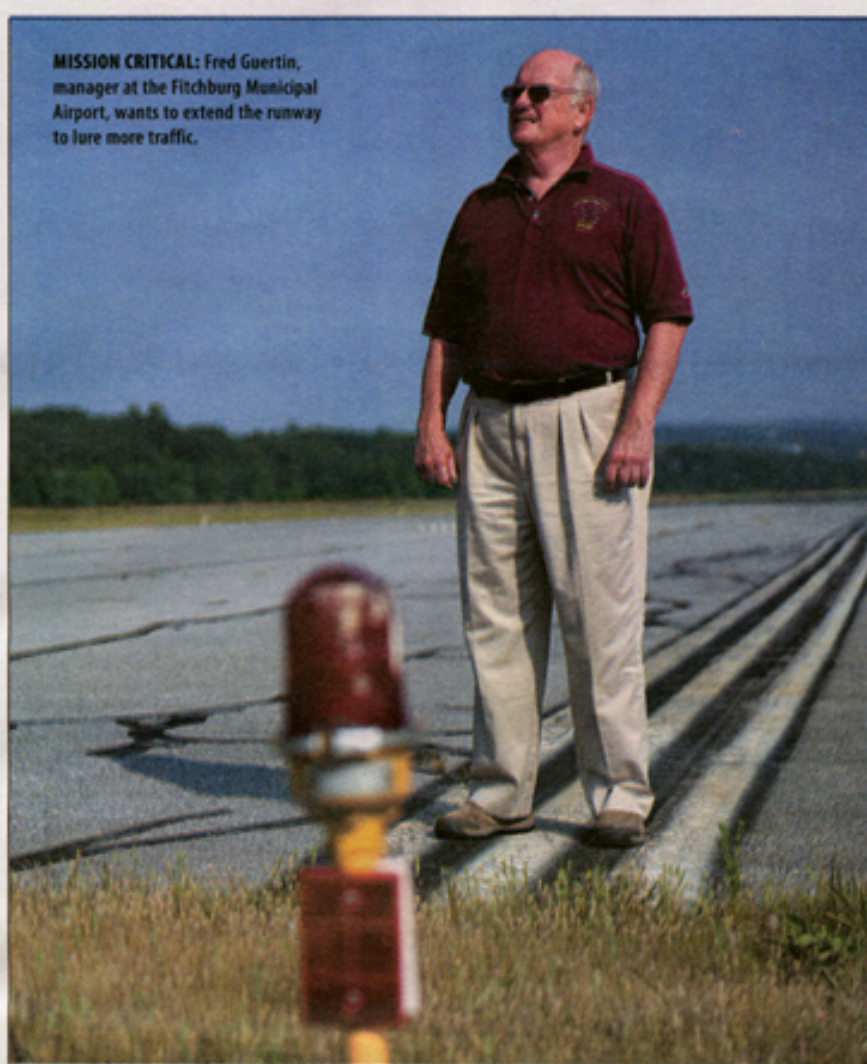
Munksjo CFO Andrew Rice said he's worried that stricter regulations regarding biomass power plants that could result from the study may hamper the company's ability to build the power plant, and hence reopen the factory.

"We're pretty much in a waiting pattern," Rice said. "Yes we're still looking at it, but depending on how things go with the release of this new study, if regulations change too much, it may not make it feasible to do the project."

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BURNING UP: Biomass plants like this one at Mount Wachusett Community College have come under fire recently.



MISSION CRITICAL: Fred Guertin, manager at the Fitchburg Municipal Airport, wants to extend the runway to lure more traffic.

Grounded

Regional airports struggle for funding, survival

BY BRANDON BUTLER
Worcester Business Journal Staff Writer

All Fred Guertin is asking for is 500 feet. That's all he says the runway at Fitchburg Municipal Airport needs to "open a whole new window" and increase traffic at the small regional transportation hub.

A 500-foot expansion of the airport's runway would put it over 5,000 feet in length, a benchmark that Guertin, who is the airport manager, says would allow the airport to accommodate larger and heavier planes. And that, Guertin is hoping, will attract new recreational fliers and business travelers.

Money Woes

So, airport and city officials are in the midst of applying for millions of dollars in federal and state grants to fund the \$16 million expansion, which Guertin hopes to break ground

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JIM DANDY

Ice Cream Empire

Popular family chain comes to Lancaster

BY LIVIA GERSHON
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When the Kimball family decided to bring its Westford-based chain of souped-up ice cream stands to Lancaster, it wasn't because of formal market research or an analysis of the small town's demographics.

According to Mary Beth Rattey, general manager of Kimball Farm at Oakridge, which opened in Lancaster at the start of the summer season, it was the former owners of the shop that initiated the sale. When the Harpers, a family with several farm operations in the North Central Massachusetts area, decided to sell their Oakridge Farm Stand, Rattey said they approached the Kimballs.

According to Rattey, the rustic building with exposed beams located on acres of Harper farmland seemed like just the right place for Kimball.

"All of that just meshes well," she said. "From one family farm to another. It's been wonderful."

Expansion Strategy

In fact, Rattey said, that's the same way the fourth-generation family business acquired its other two satellite locations, in Carlisle and Jaffrey, N.H.: Family farms contacted the Kimballs with an opportunity.

Kimball Farm Ice Cream evolved from a Westford dairy farm that the great-grandfather of current owners Michael and Peter Kimball owned back in the 1930s. The family started making its own ice cream, and that soon became its claim to fame. Then, it started adding attractions: mini-golf, a driving range, bumper boats, exotic animals and a balloon ride, among others.

So far, Kimball's Lancaster location offers ice cream, seafood and a country store, and



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Cloudy Skies Plague Local Airports

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within two years.

Guertin is looking to give the airport, one of almost a dozen small regional airports in Central Massachusetts, a boost.

And according to those in the regional airline industry, secondary airports around the region — and the United States for that matter — need it.

"For a lot of the smaller airports, we live and breathe off of the disposable income that people have," said David Dinneen, executive director of the Massachusetts Airport Management Association, a coalition of privately owned airports in the state. "Because of that, we've seen a dramatic decline in the number of people learning to fly, or actually out flying their planes. People just don't have the money to spend."

Dinneen and others in the industry blame a slowdown in airline traffic on the September 11 terrorist attacks and the national recession. Nationwide, airline traffic has declined from 835 million passengers per year at airports in 2007 to 767 million last year. Many in the industry expect that as the economy improves, passenger travel will increase.

Dinneen estimates fuel sales at Mansfield Municipal Airport, which he manages, is off 25 to 30 percent from just three years ago.

With traffic on the decline, funding for regional airports is under pressure. But cutting back now is short-sighted, according to those in the industry.

"We're not building new airports virtually anywhere in the country," said Ed Freni, director of aviation for the Massachusetts Port Authority. "But as passenger travel comes back, we can only handle so much at the larger airports, and all of these regional airports will play a role in easing the load."

Boston's Logan Airport, for example, can comfortably handle about 28 million passengers per year, Freni said. By 2020, that number could reach as high as 40 million, according to some estimates.

In Fitchburg, Guertin isn't expecting to attract millions of passengers on commercial flights to Fitchburg.

But, increasing the runway size will allow new corporate travelers to fly into the airport, mostly to visit sites in Fitchburg, Leominster, Devens or elsewhere in Central Massachusetts.

Guertin's hopes are supported by a 2008 study completed by RKG Associates, a New Hampshire-based consulting firm. That study, commissioned by the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, surveyed 182 businesses in the region and asked if they use the airport. About 20 percent said they do at least once a year to transport staff, clients or products.

"A longer runway means more of an opportunity, and it improves safety," said Darren Mochrie, a principal at RKG who worked on the Fitchburg study. "Does that translate directly into new business operations for Fitchburg or other communities? Not necessarily, but it definitely opens up the potential for businesses who are in the region to more fully utilize the airport, or for potential businesses that are looking for a new location and would find access to an airport advantageous."

Staying Competitive

Freni, the Massport airline official, said in order to keep regional airports in business, investments need to be made now. That's why Massport officials recently paid the city



FLIGHT DECK: Regional airport managers like Fred Guertin at Fitchburg Airport report declines in utilization due to Sept. 11 and overall economic conditions.

of Worcester more than \$15 million to buy Worcester Regional Airport, he said.

Massport will be studying what improvements are needed at the airport over the long term. One of the biggest upgrades, Freni said, is access to the airport. He said transportation issues to the airport will be studied in the coming weeks to determine priorities.

In the short term, he said some aesthetic improvements will be made, including new landscaping and consistent signage at and leading up to the airport.

"We'd like to put a new face on the place," he said.

The eventual goal is to increase passenger traffic and business use of the airport. It's unlikely the airport will get back to its golden years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when upwards of 350,000 passengers

traveled through the airport annually, Freni admitted.

Back then there were multiple carriers, including U.S. Airways, which flew to Philadelphia and American Eagle, which flew to New York and Chicago.

Now, South Carolina-based Direct Air is the airport's lone carrier flying to three locations, two in Florida and one in the company's home state. Since November 2008, when Direct Air began serving WRA, there have been more than 100,000 passengers in about a year and a half, according to Andrew Davis, airport manager of the WRA.

Ed Warneck, president of Direct Air, said his goal is to increase not only the destinations from Worcester, but also to launch a reverse marketing campaign to encourage residents from southern states to travel to Worcester and Central Massachusetts.

Flying High

Ten regional airports dot the landscape in Central Massachusetts.



- 1 Marlborough Airport
- 2 Hopedale Industrial Park Airport
- 3 Southbridge Municipal Airport
- 4 Worcester Regional Airport
- 5 Spencer Airport
- 6 Sterling Airport
- 7 Fitchburg Municipal Airport
- 8 Peppereil Airport
- 9 Gardner Municipal Airport
- 10 Minute Man Air Field, Stow

