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Biofuel firm eyes Williamsburg County

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By Terry Ward

If Frank Evans has his way, the Williamsburg County countryside will be a key producer of alternative energy.

Evans, a Kingstree native and the vice president of Carolina-Pacific LLC, said the county has been identified as the primary target of the company's proposed state-of-the-art biofuel facilities.

Evans and officials from his company will make a presentation to Williamsburg County Council on Tuesday in hopes of getting support for the plans of Carolina-Pacific, a newly-formed alternative energy company based in Charleston.

The company's goal is to use modern refining technologies to produce ethanol from switchgrass.

To do that, Carolina-Pacific would build eight biodiesel plants to generate 58 million gallons per year and a 100-million-gallon-per-year ethanol plant on sites in Williamsburg County, according to a press release issued by the company.

"Using modern and emerging biotechnologies, switchgrass generates more than 10 times the fuel from an acre of land than corn produces," Evans said.

According to the Carolina-Pacific release, the plan would revitalize "the local economy through innovative energy production. The required investment will approach \$250 million."

An abundance of fertile farmland and access to ports, rail transportation and interstates make Williamsburg County an attractive location for the project, Evans said.

Once operational, the facilities will bring some 160 direct jobs and another 1,500 indirect jobs through its supply and distribution activities in the area, according to the release.

"Once permitted, the 12-month construction phase of each ethanol facility will generate another 250 Carolina-Pacific jobs for Williamsburg County," Evans said.

While it would be a welcome addition, one local economic leader said the plan is only in its infancy.

"It's in the very early stages," said Hilton McGill, director of the Williamsburg County Economic Development Board. "I hope it would be viable, but there's a long way to go."

McGill said it could be a year or two before the plan takes off. He also said the decision to support the project, or not, rests with Williamsburg County Council.

For the project to move forward, Evans said, he wants the council to partner with the company to pursue infrastructure, including water and sewer, for facilities.

He also said the county would be able to seek federal and state funding in the form of grants to help develop alternative fuels.

Evans said he's talked with members of the county council on an individual basis and feels the idea has been well-received.

"Thus far, there has been no significant resistance to it," he said.

Evans also said alternative fuel projects have the support of President George Bush's administration, as well as Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina.

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