

# Pellet boiler tension flares

By Ben Bosco

BUCKLAND — Buckland resident Janet Sinclair and Dr. Mary Booth for the Partnership for Policy Integrity met with the Mohawk Trail Regional School District Budget Subcommittee on Monday, Feb. 1 to counter claims from the recent feasibility study about installing a pellet boiler system in schools, citing environmental and health risks.

Sinclair had met with the Budget Subcommittee at their last meeting to refute claims that pellet boilers, which the school would have help in purchasing through the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Regulations' (DOER) Sapphire grant, would be environmentally friendly for the region.

Sinclair and Booth have compared the claims of the DOER with the Manomet Center for Conservation's 2010 study of biomass fuel in Massachusetts.

While Massachusetts has much more stringent regulations for biomass, typically the state will import pellets from states where forests are still clear-cut, such as from the surrounding New England states, New York, and North Carolina. This, combined with the process of transporting the wood, processing it for use as pellets, and the time it takes for the trees to grow back, creates a carbon surplus during the life of the boiler, said the women.

"Your proposed biomass system will produce 166 percent as much carbon as your current propane system," said Booth. "The EPA hasn't said anything about biomass carbon emissions, even with regulations on fossil fuel emissions. The payoff time for pellet stoves to achieve even parity with oil in term of carbon emissions is 15-30 years, and to achieve it with propane is 60-90 years, with carbon neutrality

long after that. If you expect to achieve neutrality with these boilers, you need some hardy boilers."

The Mohawk District is proposing to make a system of five pellet boilers at the high/middle school, much akin to the system recently installed at Greenfield Community College. The propane boilers that the high school has now, with two installed in 1967 and 10 others installed periodically thereafter as backups, burn cleaner than the pellet boilers would both in terms of carbon emissions and particulate matter, said Booth.

"The particulate matter emission of this system is .1lb/mmBTU according to the feasibility study, the EPA standard is .03lbs/mmBTU," said Booth. "On a heat input/output basis, this is a 551 percent increase in particulate matter over the current propane

► continued on page 11

The Independent  
Serving Shelburne Falls  
and the West County  
area  
Feb 5, 2011

## BOILER

burners. The feasibility study will say that biomass is cleaner, but physics is physics. It's not cleaner!"

She noted that the five-fold increase in particulate matter could have negative respiratory effects on students and staff members, especially given a relative prevalence of asthma in the community and quite a bit of wood smoke. Pellets have also been reported contain heavy metal elements such as arsenic and chromium if wood stock is waste industrial wood, which

some is.

The pellet system is projected to burn 301 tons of pellets per year, which would cost \$250 per ton and will produce 9 tons of ash over the year.

Robert Rizzo of the DOER provided rebuttals to Booth's claims and also quoted the Manomet study, saying DOER knows that biomass fuel is not carbon neutral and they have executed studies to make that claim. He also stressed Massachusetts' stringent regulations regarding biomass — more than in any other state, he said — and the potential positive contributions of pellets.

"We were mandated by the Patrick Administration to reduce carbon emissions by 25 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050," said Rizzo. "We've struggled to get on track for that, but everything in the department is mandated to reduce carbon emission overall in the long haul. If used properly, biomass can be carbon friendly. It would not have passed through two governors and lots of different legislators if we were trying to pull the wool over their eyes."

"As a lifelong resident of Massachusetts, the idea that a program passed through two administrations is by no means an indicator that it's a good

one," said Buckland Selectman Kevin Fox.

Sinclair remarked that all studies the DOER used were tied to the Sapphire grant. She mentioned how the ecological standards were part of an unreleased study and that there was no real analysis of methods of carbon sequestration for biomass. All regulations she was able to find were for sustainably harvested whole wood. Rizzo then claimed that the standards are known to the DOER but have been unreleased.

"All the standards that exist for pellets are also tied to subsidies such as the Sapphire grant," said Sinclair. "The DOER throws around words such as 'sustainably harvested,' et cetera, but they're essentially meaningless. It's all about the subsidies, and there's nothing in there about actual environmental effects."

"If you want to get a wood boiler for the school, do it, but don't do it because you think that it would be good for the environment," said Booth. "If it's cheaper, fine. But you need to disclose the carbon footprint and the respiratory health risks of operating a wood boiler. You won't get a carbon benefit."

When Booth tried to show Rizzo the parts of the Manomet study and other parts of her

research that showed detrimental environmental effects from pellet boilers, he flatly refused to look at it.

The Budget Subcommittee may still look into the boilers for the high school, as there have been no reported issues with GCC boilers, and temperature inversions in the Pioneer Valley would only stand to trap particulate matter on campus. The Mohawk board has also looked at replacing the leaky boilers at Sanderson, whose location on a hill would negate temperature inversion issues.

"I went to GCC when they were exhibiting their new system, and I was very impressed by it," said Hawley Selectman John Sears. "I haven't heard of any problems with the particulates. It may be producing them, but I haven't heard of enough of them that it would be a danger to GCC. Also, the Big Y, Thayer Road in Greenfield, and Four Rivers Charter School are where the smoke would primarily blow. It's a heavily populated area, but it seems fine."

The Budget Subcommittee will look more closely at the current feasibility study and the Manomet study before making a final decision.

from page 1