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here’s a saying that new ideas are first ridiculed, then attacked, and finally accepted as obvious. That pretty much covers what a group of community volunteers experienced when they sought to convince their western Rhode Island school district to install the first biomass heating systems to go into a public facility in that state.

In 2005, the school district serving the two towns of Foster and Glocester had won voter approval for the bond issue that would finance a $46 million project to both build a new middle school and renovate the high school. The project’s building committee created an energy committee to work on how to heat the schools. Foster resident Rick Sparks decided he would volunteer.

Sparks thought the group should look at biomass. Nobody wanted to hear about it.

“I would bring up biomass, and people would look down at the floor,” Sparks says. “I think they thought it was a dirty fuel. Nobody was interested. So at my third or fourth meeting, I was giving my throw-in-the-towel speech. I said, ‘If no one’s interested in biomass, I’m not going to bring it up again.’

“It just so happened that a woman attended that meeting who works for the Governor’s Energy Office. She said, ‘Well, I love biomass—and I have money!’”

“I said to the group, ‘We could fund a feasibility study,’” recalls Julie Capobianco, renewables program manager for the Energy Office.

Fast-forward to late summer 2008. As new woodchip-fueled heating systems were installed—a 6.4 MMBtu/hour boiler at the Ponaganset High School, and a 3.2 MMBtu/hour system at the Ponaganset Middle School—the Building Committee had a contract to buy chips from a nearby supplier for a price equivalent to $.74 per gallon for heating oil.

When oil was $2.69, the project’s energy-services consultant had estimated the district would save about three quarters of a million dollars, per year, using biomass heat. Since then, oil had risen to more than $4 per gallon.

With economics like that, it’s easy to assume that the path was smooth from Rick Sparks’ idea to the biomass installation. But this was not such an easy process. Skeptics in influential positions on town and school committees provided stubborn opposition—even when the favorable numbers became clear.

‘We Kept Pushing and Pushing’

“The evidence was so strong and clear, we thought it was a slam dunk,” says Greg Laramie of Glocester, who chairs the building committee.

The committee accepted Capobianco’s offer to fund a feasibility study. The analysis, done by Biomass Energy Resource Center in late 2005, found it made both mechanical and economic sense to consider automated chip systems at the new middle school and the high school, which was being expanded to absorb the old middle school.
Volunteers visited nearby Mt. Wachusett Community College in Massachusetts, which has heated with biomass since 2001. They developed a PowerPoint presentation on what they’d learned.

“We were rapidly brought up to speed,” says Laramie. “The feasibility study proved that it could be done. Then it just became a question of, ‘How do we finance it?’”

An “ESCO” contract, signed by the district with energy-services company ConEdison Solutions, generated primary funding for the $11.4 million energy project, to be repaid out of energy-cost savings. About half those savings are projected to come from the chip systems. The other half will come from a wide range of energy-saving measures and technologies installed in the schools through the energy-services company’s design guidance.

But as proponents made their presentations to the School Committee and the two town councils, some folks were stubbornly opposed. Skeptics believed that biomass would be dirty, that the systems would require specialized operators, that there would not be a reliable supply of chips.

Volunteers provided information, explained, answered questions, and kept doing that. An air-quality analysis found that the systems would meet even tough new anti-pollution standards. Local resident Bruce Payton, who is supervising forester for the state Division of Forest Environment visited Vermont schools that had chip systems. He reported that they were maintained, virtually trouble-free, by the schools’ regular maintenance staff.

Payton told skeptics that Rhode Island is 56 percent forested, and that the supply of chips was far more than ample. Still, “they sort of balked for a while,” he says.

“We just kept pushing and pushing and pushing it, until finally they sort of gave in to us. Number one, we had enough information so they could see it was going to work—and two, we had some funding.”

The biomass proponents were indeed ridiculed, at times, and they were bewildered by some failed efforts to undercut and block their project.

Asked for lessons learned, Laramie says: “Assume the skepticism, and be prepared immediately with the answer.” Now, with current oil prices, there is new interest in Foster-Glocester’s project from others at the state and local levels in Rhode Island.

Locally, “I think people are reluctantly beginning to understand,” Laramie says. “Of course, they’re not going to come out and applaud it the way they opposed it. But that’s all right. It’s going to get done anyway.”

“You just keep plugging away at it,” Payton adds.