

DECISION DATE 2 May 2007	APPLICATION NO. 07/00135/FUL A5	PLANNING COMMITTEE: 19 March 2007
DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED ERECTION OF A BIOMASS RENEWABLE ENERGY PLANT		SITE ADDRESS NEW UNIT MIDDLETON BUSINESS PARK MIDDLETON ROAD MIDDLETON MORECAMBE LANCASHIRE LA3 3PW
APPLICANT: Maiden Enterprise Ltd Peel Hall Business Park Peel Road Westby		AGENT: Wilkinson Cary Planning

REASON FOR DELAY

Not applicable.

PARISH NOTIFICATION

Middleton Parish Council - Observations awaited.

LAND USE ALLOCATION/DEPARTURE

Employment uses (Lancaster West Business Park).

STATUTORY CONSULTATIONS

County Council Highways - Observations awaited.

Environmental Health - Do not consider that the objection from Gilberts Foods (see below) is justified, provided that the plant burns only clean wood as specified by the applicants. A condition is recommended to require this. Detailed observations, following the submission of more detailed building plans, to follow.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS RECEIVED

An objection has been received from the Gilberts Foods, who occupy premises nearby - they are concerned that the proposed use could be incompatible with theirs and that food safety issues would force them out of business.

Any other representations received will be reported orally at Committee.

REPORT

Introduction

This site is within an area allocated for employment related uses, immediately to the north of the village of Middleton. It is at present largely vacant scrubland, apart from a few industrial buildings inherited from the ICI depot which used to occupy the area. The one immediately adjoining the site is used as a timber warehouse.

The access road into the site, which is in good condition, has also been inherited from the ICI depot. To the south there is a belt of mature trees which screens the area from long distance views.

The Proposal

The applicant's proposal involves an industrial building of conventional appearance, with a floorspace of 1518 sq metres. It would be finished externally in profiled steel cladding. It would contain a renewable energy gasification plant which would be fuelled by fresh timber, primarily coppiced willow. It is envisaged that local farms would be able to contribute to the supply this by growing short rotation willow crops but in the short term, most of the fuel required would be brought in from Cumbria.

Wood would be supplied to the site six times a day by road, using a 20 ton wagon. The developer is exploring the possibility of importing timber via the Port of Heysham. The level of noise involved is expected to be no different from that associated with existing uses on the site.

The process is described by the applicants in their supporting statement as follows: wood is fed into a processing unit by conveyor belt, and is then broken down thermally and a clean composite gas extracted. The gas then fuels an engine which drives a generator creating electricity which is fed into the National Grid. The residual ash is stored and can be used by farmers as a fertiliser. The cycle is carbon neutral, in that the growing wood has consumed from the atmosphere equal, or more carbon dioxide in growing than it releases during the energy generation process. The plant is based on a combined heat and power process which is totally self sufficient. There is a small "flare" when production is first started but the impact of the process on the surrounding area is expected to be low.

The plant would have a generation capacity of 5MW. The applicants state that it would be sufficient to provide electricity for around 4,000 homes. This has however to be seen in context. The generating capacity of Heysham 1 nuclear power station is given as 1150MW, and that of Heysham 2 as 1250MW.

The applicants estimate that 16 full time jobs would be created, directly and indirectly, as a result of the development, but these include maintenance contractors and the "back up" staff at the company's Blackpool office. Normally only two members of staff would be needed on the site at any one time to operate the plant.

The plans as submitted did not include full details of the layout of either the building or the site. These have now been provided. The bulk of the building would be occupied by the plant but there would be an office, meeting room/kitchen and toilet accommodation at the northern end adjoining the entrance. The flue on the roof would be a stainless steel one, 3 metres high, and 25cm in diameter. Outside the southern gable wall there would be some external plant including a cooling tower; the applicants are willing to screen it with a close boarded fence.

Three off street spaces would be provided, one of which would be laid out to make it suitable for use by disabled drivers. A location has also been identified for a "Sheffield" pattern cycle stand.

Planning Policies

The following policies in the Lancaster District Local Plan are relevant to the application:

- EC5, which identifies the site of the former ICI Nitrates Plant, with an area of 15.2ha, as one suitable for business uses.
- EC6, which states that new employment related uses will be permitted provided that they make satisfactory arrangements for access, servicing, cycle and car parking; are easily accessible by pedestrians, cyclists and those using public transport; is appropriate in design to its surroundings; uses high quality materials in its construction; screens servicing and open storage from public view; makes satisfactory arrangements for drainage; do not have a significant adverse effect on nearby residents; and upgrade environmental conditions where these are unsatisfactory.

The proposal has also to be considered in relation to national guidance as set out in PPS22 (Planning Policy Statement: Renewable Energy), which was published in August 2004. This draws attention to the government's target of cutting carbon dioxide emissions by some 60% by 2050, with real progress by 2020. In the short term it seeks to generate 10% of the UK's electricity from renewable sources by 2010. Paragraph 24 refers specifically to biomass projects and energy crops:

"For biomass projects, the need to transport crops to the energy production plant does have the potential to lead to increases in traffic. Local planning authorities should make sure that the effects of such increases are minimised by ensuring that generation plants are located in as close a proximity as possible to the sources of fuel that have been identified. But in determining applications, planning authorities should recognise that there are other considerations (such as connections to the Grid and the potential to use heat generated by the project) which may influence the most suitable locations for such projects."

Considerations

The site is appropriate for this kind of use and the building proposed is little different from any other industrial unit.

The amount of traffic to and from the site is an important consideration. As with the nearby waste transfer station, it is unfortunate that the construction of the Heysham Link road has severed the route of the railway line which used to serve the immediate area. However, the six HGVs expected to visit the site each day can be regarded as acceptable for this location, taking into account the other traffic to industrial premises nearby.

In compensation, the site is exceptionally well located in relation to the National Grid, because of the network of lines associated with the existing Heysham power stations. Although most of the fuel for it would in the short term have to be brought in from outside the area, there appears to be considerable unexploited potential for growing coppiced willow locally, which could be of significant benefit to the rural economy.

The objection from Gilberts Foods will be noted. They are apparently concerned that "biomass" could involve animal waste products. There is no intention by the applicants to use these; indeed they point out that the gasification technology they intend to use is in some cases used on farms, providing energy and heat for livestock. They have provided a supporting statement which specifies that only clean timber - that is with no paint, dye or metal attached - is to be used.

The impact of the development is likely to be small, given the nature of the site and its surroundings. There is no residential property in the immediate vicinity and noise nuisance problems are unlikely to arise. However some additional planting within the application site is desirable as with any new industrial unit of this scale.

Details of the layout of the land within the application site are somewhat sparse and in particular no details have been provided of the construction of the carriageway linking the service yard to the road serving the industrial estate. This matter can however be addressed with a suitably worded condition.

Conclusions

The site is in most respects a logical one for this form of development. It has the added advantage that it would make a small, but useful contribution to the amount of electricity produced from renewable sources. It also has the potential to provide a new crop for farms in the immediate area.

It is recommended that the application should be supported.

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

This application has to be considered in relation to two sections of the Human Rights Act: Article 8 (privacy/family life), and Article 1 of the First Protocol (protection of property). There are no issues arising from the proposal which appear to override the responsibility of the City Council to regulate land use for the benefit of the community as a whole, in accordance with national law.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That **PERMISSION BE GRANTED** subject to conditions as follows:

1. Standard three year condition.
2. Amended plans 22 February 2007.
3. Development to be carried out in accordance with the approved plans.
4. Materials to be agreed.
5. Details of design, construction and servicing of the access drive into the site, including a footway at the side, to be agreed before development is commenced.
6. Cycle parking to be provided.
7. Screen fence to be provided along southern site boundary.
8. Landscaping to be agreed and implemented.
9. Only clean timber, as specified in the application, to be burnt.
10. Contaminated land study to be prepared before development is commenced.
11. As required by consultees (if appropriate).