



Springfield, IL
October 18, 2006

FutureGen project promoted; Task force to lobby for high-tech plant that will convert coal to gas

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A one-of-a-kind coal-to-energy plant would benefit Illinois and the environment, members of a newly appointed task force were told Tuesday.

Tuscola and Mattoon are among the final four sites seeking the \$1 billion FutureGen project to be built by the U.S. Department of Energy and an alliance of coal and energy utilities from the United States, Britain, China and Australia. The task force, comprising business, government and environmental leaders, gathered for the first time at the Executive Mansion on Tuesday.

"The talent that is in this room is what is going to bring this project to Illinois," state Rep. Chapin Rose, R-Mahomet, told fellow members of the 100-person task force appointed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Both of Illinois' proposed sites are within Rose's district.

Along with lending their expertise to the project, task force members will promote it throughout Illinois and will appoint a delegation to lobby for the plant in Washington, D.C., said Jack Lavin, director of the state Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, who chaired the informational meeting.

The high-tech project would use a new process to convert Illinois coal to a gas without burning it, producing nearly no noxious emissions. The gas could be used to generate electricity or produce chemicals such as hydrogen for fuel cells. Carbon dioxide, a byproduct of the process, would be pumped into the ground, where it would be stored in underground formations of rock, sand and saltwater, similar to storage areas for natural gas.

The 60,000-square-mile Illinois basin contains 38 billion tons of recoverable coal, Lavin said. That number could increase to 200 billion tons as technology improves, he said.

Another task force member, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said the group also will reach out to other eastern and central coal states for support for an Illinois site, as well as to northeastern states that suffer from the effects of Midwestern emissions, such as acid rain.

Building the project in Illinois would create 1,300 construction jobs and 150 permanent jobs, Lavin said. State government has committed \$730,000 to Mattoon and Tuscola to help them gather environmental and technical information needed for the next step in the process. Blagojevich earlier provided a \$17 million grant from a clean coal technology fund.

The other two proposed locations are in Texas, at Odessa and near Jewett. The FutureGen Industrial Alliance will choose a final site next year.