

Grand-Thinking Va. Mayor Seeks Town's Energy Independence

By Sandhya Somashekhar  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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George B. Fitch has always aimed high. As mayor of Warrenton, he has increased services while dramatically reducing taxes. He mounted a spirited campaign for governor in 2005. And years before, he founded the Jamaican Olympic bobsled team, whose story of beating the odds was adapted into a Disney film.

But his current plan might be his most ambitious undertaking yet: to make his rural town of 8,000 residents energy independent before he leaves office in 2010.

The keystone of what Fitch calls his "low-carbon diet" is to build a \$30 million plant at the county dump, which would chew up garbage, construction waste, agricultural residue, manure and other materials referred to as "biomass" and spin it into electricity and ethanol.

He reckons that his plant would generate 10 million gallons of ethanol a year and enough electricity to power every house in town with minimal greenhouse gas emissions and no use of fossil fuels.

All of this he hopes to accomplish without raising taxes or taking on debt. Moreover, he said, it could earn the town a modest profit.

"You don't have to be a big fan of Al Gore to realize that this is critical to our community and our national security," said Fitch, 59, a self-described fiscal conservative who ran for governor on the Republican ticket. "This is a sound and necessary investment that will ultimately pay dividends."

Fitch has developed a strategy to fund the project, aligning it with federal priorities to increase the chances of getting grants and loan guarantees. He plans to aggressively pursue private businesses and large energy and oil companies to invest in the project.

It is part of a larger Green Warrenton initiative, which includes instituting environmentally friendly building standards and using solar power and other technologies on government buildings.

If all goes well, Fitch said, a new plant could be up and running in three years, just in time for the end of his term. He has said he will not run again.

The town plans to launch a \$50,000 feasibility study this spring. Although many industry specialists have seen promise in Fitch's bold idea, the mayor acknowledges that there are many

unanswered questions, including whether the project is economically viable and whether the technology will work.

The unlikely initiative has already stirred some excitement in rural Fauquier County, where Warrenton lies, about 50 miles west of the District -- but the residents of this solidly Republican farming community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains don't want to be called "environmentalists."

"My idea of an environmentalist is somebody who wears Birkenstocks and carries a knapsack and has too-long hair and spends his free time working for the Sierra Club," said John "Sparky" Lewis, a longtime Warrenton Town Council member. "But I have a great respect for the land, and I think we could all be better stewards of it."

When Fitch unveiled the first inklings of his plan to the Town Council several months ago, the reception was less than warm, Lewis said.

"I thought he was nuts," he said.

But Lewis and others have been swayed, not only by Fitch's promise to spend very little taxpayer money but also by a recent effort by the Bush administration to encourage alternative energy sources that could, among other goals, reduce the nation's dependency on foreign oil.

A key component of President Bush's plan is ethanol, a gasoline substitute primarily generated from corn. Researchers have devised ways to create it from biomass -- agricultural waste, some types of trash, manure and crops such as switch grass, which is native to Virginia. That technology has yet to be tested on the scale that Fitch envisions.

Some renewable energy specialists say the Virginia Piedmont, with its wide-open spaces and proximity to dense urban areas, is the perfect launching point for the nation's renewable energy revolution.

Jeff Waldon, executive director of Virginia Tech's Conservation Management Institute, says the southeast will eventually become the nation's "biomass basket." Its soil and climate, he said, are ideal for ethanol-producing grasses. An advantage particular to Northern Virginia is its proximity to urban markets.

All that could help revive East Coast farms, which have been struggling to stay economically viable, he said.

"There's some really interesting thinking going on, especially in the agricultural community, and that's what's really exciting to us," Waldon said.

Some national security experts have been calling for the decentralization of the electrical grid, leaving it less susceptible to terrorist attacks. That has made Fitch's plan, which calls for the production of electricity in addition to ethanol as part of a joint process, appealing to his conservative constituents.

Local farmers -- by all accounts a conservative bunch not beguiled by a lot of technology -- are casting an optimistic eye toward Fitch's plan, which could offer them new economic opportunities.

"I'm not holding my breath, but I'd dearly love to see them grind up some of that stuff and convert it into a useful product," said John Schied, who owns a cow-calf operation just outside of Warrenton.

But the project's greatest advantage could be Fitch himself. A man of boundless enthusiasm, he is building a \$25 million recreation center, paying for it almost exclusively through budget surpluses. Under his watch, the town shrunk the real estate tax by 82 percent without cutting services. His secret, he said, is keeping government small and making developers pay their fair share.

Fitch, an international trade consultant who works part time as mayor, was elected to office a year after moving to town in 1997 with his wife, Patricia. For most of his life, though, he lived in Asia. He was born and raised in China, where his grandfather was a missionary, and studied pre-law in Singapore. Before entering politics, he embarked on an effort that has become a symbol of his imaginative, out-of-the-box approach: He cobbled together a bobsled team in Jamaica, sending four warm-weather athletes to the 1988 Olympics in Calgary, Canada.

A run for governor in 2005 didn't end as well. He was trounced by the Republican nominee, then-Lt. Gov. James W. Kilgore, in the party primary.

"George is a man of many ideas," said county activist Kathleen King, who supports the initiative. "As with most of us who have fertile imaginations, some of George's ideas are better than others."

Last month, Fitch spoke passionately before the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee about his proposal, urging panel members to offer incentives to communities to take similar risks.

"Local communities like ours are the answer to decentralization," he told the assembled legislators. "Don't forget about local communities being a major player in the effort to create more renewable energy."

He brushed off skeptics who point out that the technologies he is investigating are unproven and that what he envisions hasn't been done anywhere else in the country. With wise financing, the economic risk to the town would be nil, he said, so why not give it a shot?

Somebody, he said, has to take the first foray into a greener future.

"Everybody is waiting to see if these technologies will work," he said. "My view is, I don't want to sit on the sidelines. I don't mind stepping into the water."