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Students Push Big, Fat Idea For Bus Fuel

County Council Panels To Hear Biodiesel Plan

By Lori Aratani
Washington Post Staff Writer

It has been nothing but bad press for french fries, onion rings and fried mozzarella, but as it turns out, deep-fried foods might be good for something, after all.

Some students in Montgomery County are pushing a proposal to reduce air pollution by using an unlikely source to fuel school buses and trash trucks: grease from restaurant deep fryers.

Members of the Montgomery County Student Environmental Ac-

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Montgomery Students Propose Turning Old Grease Into Bus Fuel

tivists (MCSEA) are scheduled to present a plan today to members of the Montgomery County Council's transportation and environment committee and management and fiscal policy committee.

Melissa Rice, MCSEA's president and a senior at Walter Johnson High School, said the group's goal is to persuade the county to build a processing plant that would turn used restaurant grease into biodiesel fuel that could run county school buses.

Old cooking grease being used as fuel?

"When you mix [the used frying oil] with a chemical, it becomes a perfect diesel substitute," Rice, 17, said. "It's a huge advantage in terms of reducing air pollution."

Biodiesel is made from plant or animal materials, whereas diesel fuel is made from petroleum. The two can be used interchangeably in diesel engines.

A joint study conducted by the Department of Energy and the Department of Agriculture found that using biodiesel in place of diesel reduces carbon dioxide emissions by 78 percent.

"The sheer simplicity of creating biodiesel has had a lot of appeal," Rice said. "We're glad to be able to work with the county on this."

After initial conversations last year with County Council member George Leventhal (D-At Large), MCSEA presented its proposal in the summer to a group that included Leventhal, council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) and a staff member from the office of Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda).

"It was the students who got my attention focused on the idea of restaurant grease," Leventhal said. "They came and had this really well-done presentation. It was the first time I'd ever heard of it."

Leventhal said restaurants already are required to pay someone to truck away used grease. If that grease can be reprocessed into something useful, it's a win for everyone, he said.

A grease-to-biofuel pilot project is underway in downtown Bethesda, spearheaded by Federal Realty Investment Trust, one of the area's largest landlords.

Robin McBride, director of asset management for Federal Realty, said the project is part of an effort to make downtown Bethesda a "green" business district. A few months ago, she said, restaurants switched vendors and began having their used fryer oil picked up by Philadelphia-based Smarter Fuel. The company turns the grease into biofuel at a plant in Pennsburg, Pa. The biofuel is sold to a variety of customers, including Lehigh University.

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> — George Leventhal, County Council member

Will Beights, regional manager for Smarter Fuel, said about 330 restaurants in the Washington area take advantage of the service, which is free to the restaurants.

Leventhal would like to see Bethesda's program expanded countywide. And he's not the only one thinking green. Berliner, who sponsored a global-warming summit in the spring, is working on a package of proposals that are expected to include a measure to encourage the use of biodiesel in county vehicles and in the school system's bus fleet.

The use of biodiesel is growing around the country. In 2000, about 2 million gallons were used; by 2006, usage had jumped to 250 million gallons, according to the National Biodiesel Board. Some say one telltale sign that a vehicle is running on biodiesel is that it may emit a subtle french-fry odor.

Leventhal said there is no timeline on the MCSEA proposal, but one possible outcome could be the creation of a biodiesel working group to study the matter and propose an action plan.

"It's a win, win, win, win," he said. "The restaurants will win because they will pay less, get better service and have cleaner pickup. The public will win because vehicles will burn cleaner fuel."

The biodiesel plan is only one of several initiatives being championed by MCSEA, which draws its members from high schools across Montgomery County. The group was founded in 1995 by a former Thomas S. Wootton High School student. Four members of the group recently gathered at Rice's home to discuss their latest initiative. Alicia Willett and Gabe Schwartzman, both 17, attend Walter Johnson, and Stevia Morawski, 17, is a senior at Montgomery Blair High School.

Group members say they know they're setting their sights "pretty high" with their plan, but they are hopeful elected officials will see the benefits. And although they don't have cost estimates on what it might take to construct a plant to process used restaurant oil, they believe reducing pollution would make it a worthwhile investment.

Because their presentation is slated for 2 p.m. today, Melissa said members of the group will have to miss class, but she was quick to note that it's "an excused absence."

"There's more and more awareness of global warming," Schwartzman said. "When you look at world problems, this is one of the largest and scariest. We have to figure out a way to fight against the destruction of our natural resources."