Boston Company Building Hydroelectric Plant In IN

RICK CALLAHAN, Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — A Boston-based company announced plans Thursday to retrofit and reactivate a long-idle southern Indiana hydroelectric power plant in a $12 million project that's expected to generate enough electricity to power more than 2,000 homes.

Free Flow Power Corp. plans to install four new turbines at the Williams Dam on the East Fork of the White River in Lawrence County and upgrade the dam's existing powerhouse.

Water coursing through the turbines at the site about 9 miles west of Bedford would generate about four megawatts of electricity — enough to power about 2,500 Indiana homes.

Tom Feldman, Free Flow Power's vice president of project development, said the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is expected to approve an operations license for the project by early 2014, and the plant should go online by mid-2016 following construction.

He said the company began discussions on the project three years ago with local officials, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Indiana's environmental agency and the state Department of Natural Resources, which owns the Williams Dam.

DNR spokesman Phil Bloom said that once Free Flow Power obtains its federal license, the state agency would work with the company to finalize a lease for the site.

The Williams Dam opened in 1910 and originally included hydroelectric turbines, but those were decommissioned during the 1950s, the company said. The dam's existing powerhouse has set mostly empty and idle in the six decades since.

Feldman said the Williams Dam retrofit is one of 55 current or planned hydroelectric developments Free Flow Power is working on across the nation, including projects in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Mississippi. He said the company has been evaluating the potential of dams around the nation owned by states and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"There is a tremendous amount of untapped resources out there and the sites we're developing are the ones we feel can make really beneficial use of the existing infrastructure with minimal impact on the community," Feldman said.

Gene McCracken, the executive director of the Lawrence County Economic Growth

Council, said Free Flow Power is the third company that's expressed in interest in the Williams Dam, located about 25 miles south of Bloomington. He said his economic development group is thrilled by the project, which is expected to create 25 construction jobs and two permanent positions.

"It's green power, so it's really exciting that it's going to be able to put more electricity on the grid," McCracken said.

Feldman said the Williams Dam is well-placed because the company will only have to install about 300 feet of transmission lines to link into the nearby electrical grid. He said the company is in talks with potential buyers for the electricity the project will generate.

"We're moving full steam ahead, and looking forward to finding an entity interested in buying the offtake," he said.

Aside from installing four new turbines, the company will reinforce the existing powerhouse, modify that portion of the dam where water emerges after passing through the turbines and building a disabled-accessible fishing platform.

The Williams Dam project would join a handful of hydroelectric plants in Indiana, which has about five such water-powered sites.

Tristan Vance, director of the Indiana Office of Energy Development, said in a statement that hydroelectric power "is a small, but important part of any state's long-term energy policy."

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