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DISTRICT HEATING:  
LEGAL & INSTITUTIONAL PARAMETERS

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ABSTRACT

District heating is a proven vehicle for the direct application of geothermal energy. Successful systems currently exist in Iceland, France and the U.S., with numerous others in planning or construction stages. As geothermal resources come on-line, district heating is likely to be a widespread method of utilization. Such systems will provide centralized space-conditioning, as well as "cascaded" uses where feasible. Legal and institutional factors should be examined to ensure an adequate foundation for implementing geothermal district heating.

INTRODUCTION

District heating basically means the centralized distribution of heat to multiple end-users within a particular service area. Cascaded utilization would involve the successive use of progressively cooler fluid (e.g. industrial process heat, space-conditioning, greenhousing, aquaculture). The heat source may be geothermal, solar or fossil fuel. The use of cogenerated or waste heat would be especially appropriate. If alternate energy sources are used, supplemental fossil fuel capacity may be necessary to meet peak demands or emergencies. Various entities, both private and public, may constitute vehicles to develop and operate a heating district. Such a heating district will be presumed to be a utility.

INVESTOR-OWNED UTILITIES

The private sector may organize a heating district by incorporating an investor-owned utility. Some existing utilities may already have a steam distribution system in place. In other states, specific legislative authorization for utilities to provide district heating services may be required. Such authorization should allow the production and transmission of various heat mediums, including geothermal, for public and private use.

In order to incorporate a new investor-owned utility, or expand the scope of an existing one, certification from the Public Service Commission (PSC) will ordinarily be necessary. Such a "certificate of public convenience and necessity" may be difficult to obtain where the

heating district would impinge on an existing heating utility (gas/electric) service area. State legislatures should consider exempting heating districts using alternate fuel sources or waste heat from the certification requirement. Alternatively, they may direct the PSC to grant certification where the public interest would be served, despite competition with an existing utility.

Investor-owned utilities are under the rate-making jurisdiction of Public Service Commissions, although this may not be clear where heating/cooling services are newly authorized. PSC control of utility rates normally is justified due to the monopoly status accorded a utility in a particular service area. State legislatures may consider, as an incentive to investment, exempting heating districts using alternate or waste heat sources from PSC rate-making jurisdiction.

Thus, legislatures should review at least three aspects of district heating via investor-owned utilities: the authorization to provide district heating services; the requirement of PSC certification; and, the applicability of PSC rate-making jurisdiction.

PUBLICLY-OWNED UTILITIES

Counties, municipalities, special districts and other political subdivisions also are possible vehicles for implementing district heating. However, most political subdivisions possess no inherent powers. Thus, specific enabling legislation often will be necessary to authorize a political subdivision to organize a heating district. In some cases, municipal utility codes or authorizations to provide "water" may be liberally construed to cover district heating services. "Home rule" entities also may be able to implement district heating on their own initiative.

Where new enabling legislation is required, at least two approaches are possible. One is to enact a comprehensive, specific statute such as Oregon's Geothermal Heating Districts Act (ORS Chap. 523, 1977). Such an approach has the advantage of authorizing entities with a specific, single mandate. Alternatively, an existing political subdivision charter may be amended to include district heating, as Idaho has done with

its municipal code (S. 1062, 1979). While the district heating mandate to such entities may be diluted by existing functions, this approach has the advantage of utilizing personnel and infrastructure in place. In addition, where existing bonding and other powers are already adequate, the legislative drafting job is simplified.

Special districts, a species of local government, offer several advantages as district heating vehicles. They may usually cross other political subdivision boundaries and may sometimes include non-contiguous areas, important factors in matching resource and service load centers. Special districts may be able to impose differential taxing coincident with service areas. Their bond issues normally are exempt from constitutional debt limitations applied to cities and counties. And, they are organized and operated to perform a narrow range of similar functions.

Whatever political subdivision is chosen as a district heating vehicle, certain basic parameters need to be established. These relate to the method of heating district formation, the nature of its boundaries, its purposes and its powers, especially financial.

Formation of a heating district will normally involve resolutions of the governing bodies of participating political subdivisions or, perhaps, a local citizen initiative. A referendum on the matter may be required, especially where the district would have property taxation (ad valorem/special assessment) power. State legislative and/or Public Service Commission approval also may be necessary, although this is less common.

A heating district should have flexibility with regard to its boundaries. The crossing of municipal and county lines, and the inclusion of non-contiguous areas, may be necessary to match the heat source with load centers. Annexation capability would be a useful adjunct. The district also may require extra-territorial jurisdiction over sources of supply and facilities.

The purposes of a heating district will generally be to produce, distribute, utilize, sell and dispose of geothermal resources and other heat mediums for domestic, commercial and industrial use. The authority should be broad enough to include geothermal and cogenerated or waste heat sources, as well as the use of fossil fuels for peaking or emergencies such as well shut-downs. While centralized space-conditioning may often be the primary function, integrated development of cascaded uses should be within the purview of the district.

Since political subdivisions are inherently not risk-taking entities, the exploration function may require an innovative approach. Exploration may be an appropriate function for the district

where the geothermal resource is demonstrated or where outside (state/federal) capital is available. Otherwise, joint enterprise ability - joint power authorities (with other political subdivisions) and joint ventures (with private industry) - may be necessary to obtain financing. Alternatively, franchises may be granted to private companies to explore for and produce the resource under a contract of sale. Exemption of such production from PSC rate-making jurisdiction would be an appropriate incentive to attract private risk capital. Publicly-owned utilities already are exempt from PSC jurisdiction in most states.

A geothermal heating utility will require the range of powers of a body corporate and politic: legal status to sue and be sued; ability to contract for services and employ personnel; ability to acquire and dispose of property (within and without the district); ability to fix rates for service; ability to apportion user charges and enforce collection (usually via liens); and, the ability to generate capital.

The most likely avenue for capital financing of a geothermal heating district will be revenue bond issues. Service charges would be designed, and may be statutorily required, to retire revenue bond principal and interest, as well as covering operating expenses. However, the ability to levy special assessments may be a necessary concomitant in order to cover revenue shortfalls. Revenue bond issues are not subject to constitutional debt limits and usually need not be approved in an election.

Where the district has ad valorem taxation power, it may be authorized to issue general obligation bonds. Such bonds also may be retired by project revenues but are supported by the full faith and credit (taxes) of the issuing district. General obligation bonds will usually be subject to debt limits if the issuing authority is a municipality or county. Debt limits for special districts are less common, and if applicable, special district debts are generally not cumulative with other local political subdivision debt. General obligation bond issues may need to be approved in an election.

Whatever the bond option chosen, marketability is subject to legislative initiative. State legislatures should consider declaring heating district bonds a legal investment for all banks, trust funds, school funds and other institutional investors. Such accreditation would expand the capital market for the bonds.

A final consideration regarding the powers of heating districts is the grant of easements and eminent domain. Easements along, across and under public byways and existing transmission corridors would assist the district in forming its distribution network. The power to condemn easements on certain private property also may be necessary to complete the system. Consideration may be given to extending the eminent

domain power to existing geothermal wells and sources of supply, although such a proposal is likely to be controversial.

The problem of condemning existing wells or their forced incorporation into a heating district may be unavoidable where single or multi-family wells are already in use. Geothermal production for a heating district may result in reservoir drawdowns, rendering such wells useless. District monetary liability for such events, as opposed to the issuance of an injunction restraining operations, would result, as a practical matter, in condemnation. A possible method to minimize such liability would be the designation of system-wide economic drilling levels, above which no liability would accrue to the district.

Thus, the legislative agenda for public district heating is manifest. The charters of existing political subdivisions should be examined to identify suitable candidates and amended as necessary. Alternatively, a comprehensive, new district heating statute may be enacted. Formation, boundaries, purposes and powers are the parameters which need to be established for public heating districts.

#### CONCLUSION

While this paper has focused on the specific legal and institutional parameters of geothermal district heating, there are additional factors subject to legislative initiative which will generally affect the pace of implementing such systems. These include: public funding for demonstration projects; geheating public buildings; innovative and compatible building codes and zoning ordinances; public education and technical assistance; loan programs and tax incentives for alternate energy systems; royalties and taxes on resource production; streamlined regulatory and leasing procedures; and, resolution of ownership and water rights issues. While beyond the scope of this paper, the NCSL geothermal project is prepared to assist states to deal with these policy areas.