River Power Project Proposed

July 08, 2009 10:30 AM Ryan Rivet
rrivet@tulane.edu

Within the year, Louisiana could be at the forefront of a new renewable energy trend by harvesting electricity from the nonstop flow of the Mississippi River. Tulane University is hoping to play an important role in developing this new technology under the auspices of RiverSphere, a research and educational arm of the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research.

"Daytime or nighttime, rain or shine, the river is always rushing through the front door of our city, and it's something that can be part of our energy security and energy independence," says Doug Meffert, project director of RiverSphere. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

"What we're proposing is to establish a center of excellence to explore renewable energies," says Doug Meffert, program director of RiverSphere. According to Meffert, the proposed project would establish a research site for companies to explore this untapped resource.

One business already heavily invested in the technology and interested in taking

advantage of the proposed RiverSphere testing facility is Free Flow Power, a Massachusetts-based company that is hoping to have a prototype of its turbine system mounted on a barge in the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge this summer. Plans are to have a similar prototype deployed in New Orleans by the end of the year.

According to Meffert, Free Flow is in discussions with Tulane to test and demonstrate that prototype at the RiverSphere site, which is located on seven-and-a-half acres of riverfront property in the shadow of the Crescent City Connection bridge.

While RiverSphere has been broadly envisioned as a forum for art, science and technology over the course of its development, Meffert says the more recent focus on renewable energy does not signal a shift in focus.

"I see it as part of our original vision to enhance Tulane's overall research and educational capacity ... and serve the sustainability of our community in profound ways for the near- and long-term," he says.

Along with providing testing laboratories and access to the river for research and development, RiverSphere would offer an exhibition space to educate the public on hydrokinetic energy.

While the proposal is contingent on several federal and local grants that are in varying stages of being processed, Meffert says he feels optimistic the new focus on hydrokinetics will help highlight the viability of the facility.

If the city becomes a center for hyrdrokinetics research, Meffert argues that the ripple effect will be felt throughout the region.

"It's not just the energy that is exportable," says Meffert. "If this takes hold, New Orleans can be a mecca for testing and manufacturing of hydrokinetics; then we could end up exporting those technologies internationally through the port. It all makes sense. It's the right thing in the right place at the right time."

It's only natural that the river could help reinvent New Orleans as a major player in renewable energy, says Meffert, who is deputy director of the Center for Bioenvironmental Research. He is the Eugenie Schwartz Professor of River and

Coastal Studies at Tulane.

"The history of this city was based on the advantages the Mississippi River brought us," Meffert says. "I think the key to our sustainable future is again to look towards the river as a chief advantage."