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GREEN POWER PLANT WINS PLANNING AWARD

Suffolk based environmental planning practice, The Landscape Partnership, has been awarded the Royal Town Planning Institute's 2009 East of England Planning Achievement Award in recognition of its approach to securing a planning permission for a unique bio-gas plant on a former American airbase at Woodbridge, Suffolk.

This exciting and forward-thinking project was the inspiration of AgriGen Ltd, a cooperative of local farming businesses in east Suffolk. The bio-gas plant will be built on part of the former Bentwaters Airbase at Rendlesham. The feedstock comes from 'green' crops grown in rotation on local farmers' land. The crop will create 2 Megawatts (MW) of combined heat and power (CHP) using anaerobic digestion to produce methane and solid and liquid compost outputs for use as agricultural fertiliser. Biogas (from the breakdown of the energy crops) will then be fed directly into gas engines from which electricity will be generated and fed directly into the public supply grid.

An innovative scheme like this within the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) had the potential to be complex in planning terms. The Landscape Partnership's role as Planner within the project team encompassed many tasks including arbitrator, facilitator, negotiator, assessor and designer. The practice was instructed to steer the design, assessment and management of the project through the planning system. By implementing an extensive and comprehensive approach to front loading the planning application it won backing from the East of England Regional Assembly, and undertook consultation with the local community. Amongst other work, The Landscape Partnership created a 3D computer model of the proposal site and surrounding features in order to test whether the proposed biogas plant would be visible from selected viewpoints. This enabled a number of landscape mitigation and planning context scenarios to be modeled.

The project successfully addressed the following planning challenges:

- The selected site is within an AONB and within the wider setting of a Grade 1 listed building
- The need to demonstrate (through visualisation) predicted views of the site from locations up to 2km away – this was addressed by building a 3D computer model and using it to create photomontages
- The Bentwaters site, at the time of the EIA, had a complex and unresolved planning history that needed to be accounted for
- To reassure the Council's officers and Members and consultees that the proposal could stand alone on its own merits and did not prejudice future options (under discussion) for the site nor compromise the integrity of the AONB or the setting of the Grade 1 Wantisden church
- Adequately conveying the merits of the proposal to Members, officers, consultees, parish councils and the public beyond the site specific concerns thereby establishing the material considerations of trans-boundary gain, climate change adaptation and economic resilience
- Balancing renewable energy, sustainable land use (brownfield site), reduction in mineral fertiliser use with the important issues of development in an AONB and in the vicinity of County Wildlife Sites and nationally important sites for nature such as SSSIs

- Balancing the existing and emerging policy hierarchy with historic legal obligations and to represent the mismatch between the (newer) national/regional and (older) local planning policy contexts to the client, Members, officers and consultees

The scheme won unanimous approval from Suffolk Coastal District Council's Development Control Committee last year, and construction is due to begin in 2010. The nature of the plant, its feedstock source and in particular the sustainable agri-business model pioneered by AgriGen probably makes this project the first of its kind in the country.

The Planning Achievement Award recognises projects where Planners have made a real difference and considers the quality of the professional work involved.

The judges said of the bio-gas scheme, "*A truly innovative scheme with a commendably thorough preparation process. The planner's role shines through as being more than that of co-ordinator and manager – rather the planner can be seen to do these things but as a positive driver of the project*".

A spokesperson from TLP said: "*We are delighted that this project has been recognised as a winner. The project was an excellent opportunity to guide a ground breaking renewable energy project on a sensitive site through the planning process. We love to lead truly sustainable projects with innovative clients, particularly when there are so many positive environmental benefits – it is inspiring.*"

"This development is a great example of The Landscape Partnership's approach to projects:

- *detailed screening and scoping – leaving no surprises for later*
- *upfront and honest options appraisal with clients*
- *managing many and varied external specialist consultants*
- *managing the consultation phases*
- *disseminating the detail to specialist consultees and the public alike*
- *working to coordinate and balance the aspirations of client, landowner, consultee, local authority alike and achieve a successful outcome"*

The Riverside Bridge over the River Cam in Cambridge, and BeWILDerwood in Norfolk were the two runners up. The award will be presented to TLP in the spring by the RTPI President, Ann Skippers.

ENDS

Note to Editor:

The Royal Town Planning Institute East of England considers entries for the Planning Achievement Award forwarded from the national body and directly from within the region. It is awarded annually and recognises projects that score highly in the following categories:

1. Enhancement of the Physical Environment leading to recognisable social and economic benefit
2. Originality of approach
3. Quality of professional work involved in design, planning concepts and planning techniques
4. Extent to which achievement acts as a model elsewhere or as a basis for development of further related schemes
5. Role of planner as enabler or co-ordinator
6. Extent to which planners worked in partnership with other agencies and the community

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