Gasohol plan isn't worth the gamble

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SANTA Clara County farmers have a problem: They can't make enough money on their traditional crops to stay in business. The United States has a problem: Petroleum is expensive, increasingly scarce and undependable.

County Supervisor Dominic Cortese thinks he has a solution: Encourage the farmers to produce sugar beets and corn, distill alcohol from them, and sell it as fuel for cars and trucks, including the county's vehicle fleet.

Cortese wants the board of supervisors to spend $10,000 for an initial one-month study of his idea, possibly followed by another $30,000 for a more detailed six-month study. His colleagues haven't voted the money yet, but they seem enthusiastic.

Cortese's plan has a certain plausibility. The county does have the agricultural capacity to produce all sorts of biomass fuels, and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources is economically and environmentally vital in the long run.

But a closer look reveals problems with the idea — problems serious enough to warrant some long, hard thought before the county buys any expensive studies.

First, there's the cost factor. Even with federal tax breaks and production subsidies, alcohol still isn't price-competitive with gasoline as a motor fuel. Gasohol, a blend of 90 percent gasoline and 10 percent alcohol, gives slightly better mileage than straight gasoline, which partly offsets its higher cost.

The county's fleet might or might not save money running on gasohol; area motorists might or might not choose home-grown gasohol over ordinary gas. It's a gamble.

Whether Santa Clara County alcohol could compete with alcohol produced in the Midwest grain and corn belts is another gamble. So is the environmental impact of large-scale use of gasohol.

Finally, the whole question of funding is a gamble big enough to make Jimmy the Greek break out in a cold sweat.

Carl Moyer, a gasohol expert at Acurex Corp. in Mountain View, believes the county would need to spend $30,000 or more on preliminary studies just to apply for federal grants to do *another* $200,000 to $300,000 worth of feasibility studies before anybody even began to build an actual alcohol plant.

We would have fewer misgivings about getting involved in this massive crap shoot if the county had money to burn, but it doesn't. Just a few days ago the supervisors turned down $50,000 for Mediterranean fruit fly control, saying the county was $3.2 million in the red and couldn't afford it.

If the county can find ways to foster private development of alcohol fuel projects at minimal public expense, fine. But we don't think this is the time to commit $40,000 for very preliminary studies of a very problematical, although well-intentioned, program.