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Board backs alcohol fuel proposal for South County

By Susan Yoachum
Staff Writer

Supervisor Dominic Cortese won enthusiastic support from his colleagues Monday for an alcohol fuel project he proposed as a political salve for angry South County farmers.

By a unanimous vote, the supervisors took the first step toward authorizing a study of Cortese's ambitious proposal.

If his plan proves feasible, it could create a new market for sugar beets and corn, which would be converted to alcohol fuel.

Cortese, Democratic candidate for the 24th Assembly District, made the

proposal on the same day that supervisors formally adopted a land-use plan opposed by South County farmers. The farmers say the new, more restrictive plan will make them less able to sell land no longer profitable to farm.

Cortese said his proposal could improve the profitability of their land by giving them two new crops that would have a good market. He said there is now little sugar beet and corn farming in the South County, and little incentive for it.

The key to creating a market for the sugar beets and corn is the construction of plants to convert the crops to alcohol fuel. According to

Cortese, the county's role would be to sponsor an alcohol fuel production program to attract federal grants to be used by the private sector for plant construction.

Dr. Carl Moyer, an alcohol fuel production specialist for Acurex Corp. of Mountain View, told supervisors that "the county stands in an unusual and powerful position to absorb most or all of the alcohol manufactured" because of its large vehicle fleet.

Although alcohol fuel is more expensive than gasoline — about \$1.80 per gallon — Moyer told the board that it is cheaper in the long run because it gives better mileage per gallon.

Moyer said another offshoot of the project would be to use cannery wastes to produce the alcohol fuel.

As the plan began to appeal to other supervisors, Cortese termed it "something as important to the county as Silicon Valley" because it could create a "major new industry" here.

The board stopped short of authorizing any money for a feasibility study. That action is expected next month, when the staff returns with a request for study proposals approved by the board.

Cortese said the initial one-month study would cost \$10,000. If "no major

obstacles" surfaced, he said, a six-month feasibility study would cost \$30,000.

Although the county would have to provide the "up-front seed money," Cortese said, the county could be reimbursed with federal funds earmarked for the alternative fuel production program.

Supervisor Dan McCorquodale left open the possibility of a greater county role in the alcohol fuel production, adding that the city of Santa Clara runs its own utility plant.

"But we aren't in any position yet to make a determination on who is going to do it," he said.