Energy auditors seek ways to lower Dome utility costs

By DONNA FONTENOT
Staff Writer

Four months of work at the Cajundome has an energy management consultant convinced his firm can "do a lot of good" in holding down a projected $450,000-500,000 annual utilities bill at the new civic center. Another four months will tell how, says Jim Poche, president of Poche Associates. The company has an eight-month contract to act as "technical assistant" for putting in place preventive maintenance and systems operations procedures at the Cajundome. Its goal is to reduce the yearly utilities bill through efficient use of heating and cooling equipment, and without sacrificing occupant comfort.

"We haven't been asked to give a number (as a projection on future utilities bills), and don't think the City's money would be best spent that way," Poche told The Advertiser Tuesday. "We're comfortable the ($450,000-500,000) estimate is safe. In other words, we don't think utility bills will go higher than $600,000," he said.

His company's job is to advise Cajundome officials on how to get the facilities to turn the building over to the City and an energy manager is hired, and beyond that if the City decides to work through consultants on energy management longterm. The $450,000-500,000 utilities projection mentioned by Cajundome Director Mike Barber at a Citizens of District A (CODA) meeting yesterday comes from City and USL officials, as best Poche understands it.

Barber told CODA that design of a 165-foot high, domed civic center has quite a bit to do with the high projection. Arenas in Pensacola, Fla., Tampa, Fla., and Toledo, Ohio, with comparable seating capacity but flat roofs will get away with the same energy rate as the high projection. Without sacrificing occupancy comfort, Poche said. "We won't try to dispute the number," Poche repeated. "It's not an easy thing to determine those estimates. It takes a lot of time and we can't go to detailed analyses to come up with another figure."

"It's my understanding that Mike (Barber) will budget for it anyway," he said. "But we'll look at their assumptions, at the factors on which they based the estimate, and maybe, that way, we can bring the bills down."

The Cajundome's main heating and cooling system -- including the chiller and boiler -- will have to be operated every time even one meeting room of the civic center is used, he and Barber said yesterday. But not all "air handlers" will be necessary, and shutting off some will reduce energy consumption, Poche said.

The Cajundome is not designed to use only small pieces of it, but in cases where the whole facility is needed, some areas can be more efficiently used than others, he added. "I could be that using Meeting Room 10, as opposed to Meeting Room 3 could save energy," Poche pointed out. "It could be that the Cajundome doesn't take that long to cool and that instead of having a guy turn the whole system on that first day of a four-day convention we can program it to come on only at certain times."

The air conditioning control unit is computerized and can be programmed, even from Poche's company should the City ever decide to let it totally handle energy management and put a person in the Cajundome to link up with the firm's computer, he said.

Experimental runs will be conducted before the Cajundome's scheduled Nov. 10 opening to see how long the system does take to go into effect, Poche added.