Council approves $250,000 in sales tax funds for equipment.

The ignition of bee's wings and dust that caused a fire at Frito-Lay a year and half ago has ramifications today.

Gothenburg's plant manager Scott Bartels said rebuilding one of three dryers, where the explosion occurred, was completed a year ago.

But to insure a better quality and safer product, plus safety for employees, the company is installing a $4 million system that cleans corn before it goes into dryers.

"We feel like we dodged a disaster in the events that led to the fire," Bartels told local city council members shortly before they approved $250,000 in sales tax money that will help offset some of the costs of the project.

Action took place at the Sept. 13 Gothenburg City Council meeting.

Bartels said three separate aspiration systems are being installed in front of the plant's three dryers.

Because Frito-Lay plants—like Gothenburg's—handle such high-quality corn, Bartels said grain aspirators have become an industry standard for food-grade corn.

“They are very simple machines that use air to clean corn,” he explained. “The equipment generates air movement to clean the grain.”

At the tallest point, he said the aspirators are 60-feet high.

Kice Industries of Wichita, KS, began work on the project last May with the hydro-excavation of the floor to install footings.

Completion of the project is expected by Oct. 1 just before the 2011 corn crop starts trickling in.

Bartels added that the other grain-handling plant in the Frito-Lay, Inc. system, in Sidney, IL, has similar equipment to what is being installed at the Gothenburg plant.

“But ours is state of the art,” he said.

The quality of grain from the 2009 corn crop contributed to the dryer fire, Bartels said.

“With its high moisture and low quality, it was the worst corn on record,” he said, noting that the 2010 crop has been the best quality.

So far, Bartels said the 2011 corn crop is looking good.

City attorney Mike Bacon said the Redevelopment Authority recommended the grant as an investment in the future of agriculture in Gothenburg.

Bacon noted that Frito-Lay has paid back two interest-free loans, one from sales tax funds and

the other from reuse money, totalling $800,000 to help build the plant.

Next year, Frito-Lay will pay about $270,000 in property tax when the plant's improvements are taxed along with the land.

The company received tax-increment financing, and paid taxes on land, instead of improvements, for the past 15 years.

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