

From Our Point Of View

Fuller Pool solar idea sounds good

ANN ARBOR will switch from gas to the sun for heating Fuller Pool and its bathhouse, if City Council follows advice from the Energy Steering Committee's Task Force on Renewable Energy.

The basic idea would be to replace Fuller Pool's broken down gas-fired boiler with solar heating panels.

John A. Clark, a U-M professor of mechanical engineering who heads the Energy Steering Committee, emphasizes that this suggestion aims at more than cutting the city's utility bills somewhat. The main purpose would be to provide a fairly high-visibility demonstration that in southern Michigan — which isn't in the sunbelt by a long shot — "solar heating of domestic hot water is feasible."

As if to prove there's nothing academic about the value in that sort of demonstration, plans for cutting federal heating assistance grants for low-income families from the 1982 federal budget were announced from the White House the same day the solar heating demonstration project was presented here.

This isn't to suggest that solar heating can provide a quick fix for Michigan homeowners anxious to cut or sharply reduce gas and heating oil costs. It's difficult to imagine solar heating ever entirely replacing fossil fuels for heating homes and commercial buildings in this part of the country, unless startling discoveries are made in means of storing energy collected while the sun shines, and in the cost and size of heat-collecting panels.

It is reasonable to imagine using existing technology to link homes over fairly large areas into a shared solar plant capable of heating water and perhaps running appliances during summer months.

This would be quite a ways short of ending all dependence on regional power plants, such as Edison's coal-burning plants. Nevertheless, it would be an important step into alternative energy applications. Preparation for that sort of step needs to include demonstration projects with some real usefulness in themselves. That's what the Fuller Pool solar project would be.

THERE IS nothing frivolous about the idea of using a swimming pool as a major demonstration project.

It could scarcely be argued that all the ways which humans have found to manipulate and apply energy started in strictly utilitarian ways. Anthropologists speculate that the wheel was first devised when some ancient group of workers in Asia, assigned to moving huge boulders to build a king's monument, hit on the idea of putting rolling logs underneath instead of dragging their burden along the ground. In hot weather, Ann Arbor's swimming pools rate as semi-necessities. Given City Council's approval to demonstrate solar heating of water at Fuller Pool, specialists in this relatively new application of the original energy source would have a good chance of hitting on practical applications that are so far only dimly imagined.