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CONA Position Paper

(Unanimously approved by the CONA Board of Directors on January 14, 2009)

The Tallahassee-FSU-BG&E Proposed Biomass Facility

The stated mission of the Tallahassee-Leon County Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA) is *"to improve and sustain the quality of life in a diverse Leon County by uniting, preserving, strengthening and honoring neighborhoods through effective advocacy, education and networking opportunities, civic engagement and community action, and neighborhood collaboration."*

Because we exist to advocate for neighborhoods and promote quality of life in our community, it was appropriate for CONA to participate in discussions about the proposed Tallahassee-FSU-BG&E Biomass Facility. Given significant community interest in the proposal, CONA carefully considered the issues and developed the following position on the proposed biomass facility. Background information and CONA's considerations are provided below.

CONA's Position

The proposed plant would affect south side neighborhoods directly; yet all Tallahassee utility customers and citizens have a stake in the siting and construction of a new electrical power plant in our community.

CONA supports diversification of our energy supply in a manner that uses local renewable resources. However, CONA does not support the construction of the BG&E biomass facility at the proposed location. To move forward, this project must give the respect and honor due to the established neighborhoods and resolve conflicts with established goals set in our community's Comprehensive Plan for future land use.

Background

As part of the Florida State University Master Plan, BG&E has proposed a 42-megawatt biomass plant near Roberts Avenue on the south side of Tallahassee. The plant would transform the energy in waste vegetative materials into electricity through a gasification process. The resulting electricity would be fed into the Tallahassee utility grid.

Biomass is a proven option for producing electricity from a renewable resource. It is sustainable over time and reduces fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, and can provide economic benefits through local fuel price stability and

diverse jobs. As part of a broad strategy to meet our community's energy needs, increased use of renewable resources is consistent with CONA's efforts to promote energy efficiency through the Tallahassee Neighborhood Energy Challenge. Despite the benefits of using renewable resources, biomass plants are industrial facilities, and as such their design and location must balance the potential benefits of such a facility with the quality of life impacts to local neighborhoods and their residents.

Considerations

There are many quality of life issues involved in the proposed biomass plant. CONA is aware of these issues and provided a forum for information-sharing and wide-ranging community discussion by hosting the Biomass Forum on Monday, January 5th. However, as a neighborhood advocacy organization, CONA based its position on an evaluation of consistency between the proposed project and the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan, specifically the Southern Strategy.

CONA feels that the proposed biomass facility conflicts with the following key parts of the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan.

Land Use Goal 11: *“The goal of the Southern Strategy is to encourage quality land development and redevelopment which results in increased population growth toward the southern part of the Tallahassee urban area... attain an income mix in the Southern Strategy Area that is comparable to the remainder of the urbanized County...and stop the further physical deterioration of this vital part of the community.”* Construction of a large industrial facility is likely to lead to increased residential blight as properties near the plant become less desirable for new landowners. The potential of a significant decrease in property value would limit the ability to attract higher-income residents to help achieve the abovementioned mix of income among south-side residents.

Policy 11.4.1: *“Where environmentally, economically and geographically practical, new heavy infrastructure land uses such as...power plants which serve larger than neighborhood areas, shall be located in areas outside of the Southern Strategy Area.”* The proposed biomass facility is designed to serve the broader community, and thus locating this facility in the Southern Strategy area is directly in conflict with the Comprehensive Plan.

Although the Comprehensive Plan directs that “Such decisions are to be based on a sound balance of social, economic, and physical development criteria that are designed to make better use of the available resources to the south” (Goal 11), the balance in this case clearly weighs in favor of protecting local neighborhoods.

Recommendations

Location: All sites have potential constraints, some of which (e.g. rezoning) can be addressed without impacting residents. CONA encourages the involved parties (City, County, FSU, and BG&E) to continue looking for a new location for this facility.

Alternative viable sites may exist. Any sites proposed in the future should be located a significant distance from residential areas to avoid impacting local residents. A community discussion about potential locations should include a strategy for integrating green technology into our electricity generation system in a way that does not negatively affect City and County residents.

Public Participation: Although the project negotiations began in 2006, active engagement of local residents did not occur. Although all official requirements for public notification may have been met, CONA is concerned about the lack of “good faith” public outreach associated with this project. For example, legal notices were placed in local papers to meet the letter of the law, but notification of changes to the “FSU Master Plan” is not meaningful to the average resident. Notification in technical or vague terms is insufficient to fully notify the public. CONA stands ready to facilitate community discussion of new biomass facility sites and the role of green energy in our community’s future.

Future efforts to site large industrial or institutional facilities should pursue public participation in good faith, and not just per the letter of the law. To support this goal, CONA will work with the City and County to revise public notification requirements that include more meaningful content for the layperson and are triggered earlier in the planning and development process when potential incompatibility in uses are identified.

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