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## Fla. Supreme Court may hear biomass case

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The fate of a planned biomass power plant that will create electricity by incinerating wood waste may be left to the state's Supreme Court.

Dian Deevey and Paula Stahmer, Gainesville citizens, filed a motion to appeal the 3-2 decision of the Public Service Commission to allow the building of a biomass plant in northwest Gainesville.

Stahmer said the project could potentially bankrupt the city and hurt the environment.

Construction on the plant, which will be built and run by American Renewables, is scheduled to begin in December, but it the plant must clear challenges from residents.

The first challenge is the Public Service Commission's decision on whether or not the city needs to build another power plant. The first hearing was in March, and there was another hearing in May.

Stahmer said during the process Gainesville Regional Utilities and city officials, admitted there is not a need for a new energy source until 2023.

But GRU spokeswoman Kim Jamerson said that depends on a scenario in which all of GRU's power plants, including reserves, are in operation at once.

If that were to happen, she said, the rates of electricity for customers would be high because the backup plants are costlier to run.

She said the proposed biomass plant would provide increased reliability.

The second challenge to the plant getting a site certification permit. Former Gainesville Mayor Thomas Bussing challenged the permit on the basis that the plant would create harm the environment.

The hearing ended last Friday, but no ruling has been delivered.

Potentially dangerous plant emissions are among the top concerns of the biomass opponents, said Josh Levine, the plant project manager.

According to a press release from the Anti-Biomass Incineration and Forest Protection Campaign, Tallahassee asthma specialist Dr. Ron Saff said emissions from biomass plants can cause asthma, heart attacks and cancer.

But Levine said there are measures in place to prevent toxic emissions, including a monitor in the smokestack that continuously records the contents. The results from the monitor will be reported to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Another concern of biomass opponents is the type of wood the plant will use.

Levine said four types of wood would be used. One of the types is forest residues, or timber leftovers, including tree tops, branches and unwanted tree trunks. The timber industry, he said, normally stacks this wood and burns it in open fields.

Another type is urban wood waste, which residents and other businesses clean up, normally collected by the city and thrown into landfills.

Wood will also come from mill residue and opportunity fuels, which are the trees out of urban areas that are downed by storms and also some that are cut down to prevent forest fires.

Opponents of the biomass plant say they fear that in order to obtain wood waste, collectors would go into the forest and pick up loose biomass. This would disrupt the natural decomposition processes of the forests.

But Levine said that won't happen.

The plant will hold long-term contracts with suppliers to provide clean, wooden biomass material, he said., adding that the plant won't burn any treated wood, construction or demolition debris, trash, tires or "anything that is not clean."

He expects the ruling to be in the favor of building the plant.

"I'd be very surprised if our site certificate was not granted, taking into account that we have received approval from every local, regional and state regulatory agency," he said.

The third challenge is to the air-quality permit. A hearing will be held Sept. 20.

Issues related to air quality have been brought up in previous hearings, but it is still under discussion whether testimony from the August hearing will be used.

Levine said he also expects that the air permit will be granted because he already received a draft permit.

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