The Energy Debate in Florida: The Case of the Biomass Plant in Gainesville
Introduction

- Community conflict over energy sources in Florida
- Case of the biomass plant in Gainesville, Florida
- Practicum
  - Focus group for opponents to biomass plant
- NRLI skills
- Lessons learned
Background

- Proposal for new source of energy in Gainesville, Florida
- Community disagreement
- Gainesville City Commission approved proposal for plant in 2009
- Citizen opposition to plant emerges
- Gainesville Renewable Energy Center (GREC) began construction in 2012
- Operating at full capacity end of 2013
- Community contention remains regarding the biomass plant
Background

- Opponents of the plant - Gainesville Citizens CARE
  - Air pollution
  - Could use “dirtier” fuels
  - Will drive up the cost of energy for Gainesville residents
  - Use of timber for fuel encourages monoculture silvicultural operations
  - May lead to deforestation
  - Will lead to increased energy rates
Background

- Proponents for the plant
  - Sustainable (locally sourced waste wood)
  - Won’t pollute
  - Carbon neutral
  - Enhances local biodiversity
  - Better than burning fossil fuels
Focus Group

- Focus group for opponents to the biomass plant
  - Discuss their community involvement
  - Discuss lessons learned through the campaign
  - Advice for other community groups

- Participants
  - Members of Gainesville Citizens CARE
  - Elected officials
  - Lawyers
  - Concerned citizens
Focus Group Preparation

- Situation assessment
  - Identify stakeholders
  - Think about positions vs. interests
  - Think about relative power of each group
  - Investigate levels of engagement
  - Go back through the history of the conflict
**Situation Assessment**

**Issue:** The city of Gainesville was facing increasing energy needs, and was debating about the best way to meet this growing demand. A biomass plant was built and has been operating since 2013, however the discourse surrounding this decision remains contentious.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Stakeholder Engagement</th>
<th>History/Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gainesville Citizens CARE/activists</td>
<td>Some weren’t convinced another plant was needed. Don’t think biomass is the right source</td>
<td>Want to be heard and have their views respected. Feel ignored and attacked</td>
<td>Feel as though they should have influence but are disappointed they don’t seem to</td>
<td>Unite them against perceived abuses of power and corruption</td>
<td>Comprised of former elected officials, activists, and subject experts</td>
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<td>2. GRU Ratepayers</td>
<td>Don’t want a rate increase</td>
<td>Substantive, don’t want to pay more for utilities</td>
<td>Little influence over their utility/elected officials</td>
<td>The fear that their rates may go up to pay for the new plant might engage them</td>
<td>Varying rates of involvement/awareness of GREC and GRU</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. GRU</td>
<td>Want a safe, profitable investment</td>
<td>Substantive interests. Simply seeking profits through business</td>
<td>Seemingly very powerful</td>
<td>They want a new project, but don’t want to lose face w/ratepayers</td>
<td>Specifically proposed and supported GREC</td>
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<td>4. Landowners selling wood to GREC</td>
<td>Profit seeking. Make money from former waste products</td>
<td>Substantive. See an opportunity to benefit economically</td>
<td>Typically wealthy, large landowners. At least somewhat influential</td>
<td>The opportunity for them to convert waste to $ compels their engagement</td>
<td>Varying relationships with other stakeholder groups; dependent/supportive of GREC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Neighboring communities</td>
<td>Concerned about smell, noise, and safety</td>
<td>Substantive for property values. Want to feel respected by utility and elected officials</td>
<td>Voting public can intimidate elected officials, but not very organized</td>
<td>Concerns about smell, noise, safety, and property value will get them engaged</td>
<td>Varying rates of involvement/awareness of GREC and GRU</td>
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</tbody>
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Focus Group Preparation

Based on our situation assessment we:

- Framed the focus group for stakeholder buy in
- Contacted stakeholders
- Used a snowball technique to recruit participants

Planned for the meeting

- Chose meeting space
- Constructed an agenda
- Planned for breaks (food and beverages)
- Planned/prepared timeline activity
- Materials (notepaper, pens, recorder, signs, etc.)
Executing the Focus Group

- Arrived early to set up room
- Had to modify agenda on the fly
  - Some showed up late
  - Participants were skeptical
- Passionate participants meant managing multiple dominant talkers
Themes of the Focus Group

- Residual anger and feelings of betrayal
- Disappointed with the outcome
- Feelings of powerlessness/voicelessness
- Burn out from involvement
- Continuing desire to educate residents about the issue
Conclusion: Lessons Learned

- Planning focus groups
  - Thinking about impression management during recruiting stage
  - Logistics
- Balancing flexibility with meeting goals