



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

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NRLI Class XIV  
Practicum Project  
April 16-17, 2015

# 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.

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

# 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