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## Our Opinion: Cabinet's last stand

It's a chance to stamp 'OK' on biomass

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In 2009, Tallahassee managed to chase away a proposal for a biomass plant near Roberts Avenue. The \$150 million Biomass Gas & Electric project fell victim to a not-in-my-backyard mentality that simply buried all the sustainable energy talk.

Which is, to date, primarily talk.

Concerns about climate change and a dependence on foreign energy supplies lead to endless talk about green technology that includes renewable energy such as biomass.

Of course here in the capital, we're scarcely even talking about energy, so frightened-off were public officials after the biomass bomb.

Statewide, however, a few "programs" are in the works — though they too are primarily good ideas at this point.

The state established the Clean Energy Investment Program to invest some federal stimulus money in companies that have a solid plan for upgrading facilities and equipment to make them more energy efficient, or to showcase commercially available energy-efficient products.

Then there is a move to "biopower" through the "Farm to Fuel" program that outgoing Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson has promoted as an opportunity for rural counties to create their own energy with their own resources. Many here in North Florida have huge forestry resources, literally energy to burn, and Mr. Bronson points out how biomass production also gives the forestry industry a reason to maintain healthy, sustainable forests.

A hard sell

Still, it's a hard sell. A proposal to build a \$250 million biomass plant on State Road 12 in Gretna crumbled this past March after the company, Adage, ran into strong opposition over issues of noise and pollution.

Despite the hundreds of jobs the plant would have

created, officials shooed Adage out of town. Rural residents who worried about emissions from a regulated plant continue to burn their brush and leaves and wood stoves. Controlled burns are ongoing. Diesel trucks idle at highway truck stops. And utilities continue to generate power by burning fossil fuels.

On Tuesday, however, the governor and Florida Cabinet have an opportunity to weigh in with support for renewable energy and a cleaner environment — and with more than a proclamation or pep talk.

At their final meeting as the state's sitting Cabinet, Mr. Bronson, as well as CFO Alex Sink and Attorney General Bill McCollum, along with outgoing Gov. Charlie Crist, will make a pivotal decision regarding energy.

It is, in some respects, a modest one, concerning the siting of a biomass plant in Gainesville where a proposal by the Gainesville Renewable Energy Center (GREC) has, at last, won approval and endorsement by a wide variety of government agencies, public officials and citizens.

But it has been a long haul.

The community has discussed this 100-MW biomass-fueled renewable energy facility for no less than seven years. There have been more than 40 public meetings and workshops conducted since 2002, all occurring since the city decided against a coal-fired facility.

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Arguments were framed and ultimately persuasive — and to the point that any anti-biomass candidate who ran for election recently was defeated.

The project by American Renewables, LLC., of Boston, Mass., will supply Gainesville Regional Utilities with power for 30 years, enough clean renewable energy from a variety of wood waste to fuel 70,000 homes.

Some 45 permanent, full-time "green-collar" jobs will be added at the plant, plus some 650 indirect jobs supplying it with biomass fuel and in secondary work. Some 300 construction jobs will be created over the three-year construction period. In a region with 11-percent unemployment, the impact of these new jobs and the anticipated \$31 million in annual salaries is monumental.

## Final approval

Tuesday, Mr. Crist and the Cabinet, all of whom say they are champions of sustainable, renewable green energies, will be asked to give final approval of the site certification. Their approval is needed so construction can move forward and the plant be made operational by 2013 — in time for the project and community to benefit from almost \$200 million in federal tax credits.

It is hard to imagine that this final step will be denied. Given that a whole new Cabinet and new governor are coming on board in January, it would be a shame to defer, delay or deny and hope for the best under a new administration.

As we have said before, the world's energy situation and climate demand that things be done differently, and we in Florida are perfectly positioned to be leaders in this change. But we have to do more than just talk.

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