

Many urgent concerns, local fracking not among them

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Our county commissioners lack imagination.

When they asked County Attorney Michele Lieberman to study a fracking ban, they ignored other imminent dangers: snowmobiles, beach condos, mountain-top strip mining and Vegas-style casinos.

The Sun reported Jan. 14 that "no one has suggested fracking in this county, and there is no expectation of finding natural gas if they did."

Fracking, as some commissioners remarked, was not on the agenda. Perhaps the commissioners were simply being courteous to a new member, Ken Cornell, who brought up the topic, and to guests who had come to speak against fracking, two members of the admirable Our Santa Fe River nonprofit.

There are both substantive and procedural problems with a hurried approach to hydraulic fracturing.

Substance: There are two sides to the issue. Fracking uses dangerous chemicals, but some engineers argue the molecules are pumped so far down that the quantities used are harmless, in concentrations less than in natural rock and safer than the

pharmaceuticals remaining in the sewer waste GRU returns to the aquifer after treatment.

What about climate change? Does fracking slow it, because natural gas burns cleaner than coal, or accelerate it by making hydrocarbons cheaper overall?

Procedure: Maybe fracking is bad, but we don't know that as a community. Since it would bring jobs and tax revenue, we should want to know before acting. Let the issue be broadly debated, hold hearings and seek advice from the county's advisory groups.

But why go to all that trouble now when the chance that we'll see fracking is the same as the likelihood that we'll call Ted Yoho Mr. Speaker? Why waste time and effort on the correct procedures before there is a decision to make, a decision likely never to be needed, and why decide without going through the correct procedures?

As to the aquifer, the Democratic establishment's sincerity about it will shine through when the rich pay heavily for irrigating their lawns. Did anyone remember to request that Michele Lieberman explore how to negotiate that?

Though local fracking is a tornado in a blender, it symbolizes a larger point. The Democrats who have ruled our county and Gainesville governments for years should focus on urgent concerns, and especially on the people in east Gainesville and east county.

To be sure, the Democratic establishment has done much for those areas, providing public safety, supporting public transit and improving parks. But what about quality schools and quality jobs?

With schools there is now hope, if the school board will grant new superintendent Owen Roberts the backing he needs to achieve his vision. Let's see what happens. A

school board truly concerned about children from low-income households would be doing whatever it takes to raise our schools far above the Florida average.

As to jobs, a county commission truly concerned about our low-income residents would jump all over the opportunity offered by Plum Creek — a chance for up to 30,000 jobs plus permanent land preservation plus a boost to sorely needed tax revenue in exchange for the right to develop 3 percent of the county's area.

Truly concerned county and city commissions would be asking what they can learn from the cities of Alachua and Newberry about encouraging positive rapid responses to employment-creating opportunities, while remaining attractive. They would be asking their planners and growth managers to study those municipalities and apply what they learn.

A truly concerned county commission would be actively engaging its Economic Development Advisory Committee in providing guidance, a perspective complementary to that of their planning staff. Currently that committee often fails to meet quorum because some of the members have the feeling they are treated as perfunctory consultants.

A get-things-done type, Matt Webster, has agreed to head EDAC in 2015. Let's see how county commissioners interact with him.

What about households in east Gainesville? Nationally, fracking brought down gas prices, a blessing to folks who drive miles west to their low-wage jobs every morning and a contrast to their soaring GRU electricity charges. Are their leaders starting to ask whether their people, after long years of government control by the Democratic establishment, have quality schools and quality jobs? Would they have fared better if they had been part of, say, the city of Alachua? Could they forge a stronger alternative political alliance?

Are they fed up with being taken for granted?

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