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MITCHAM: GRP, health and money

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Georgia Renewable Power (GRP) seems to fill our front page every week these days.

That's because there are many facets to this story. But I put public health at the top of the value chart in covering this issue. Yes, there are a lot of money matters to look at. And most certainly, this county needs real revenue boosts. But as long as a carcinogen is burned in mass quantity next door to homes in Madison County, then that requires real scrutiny. Anything less would be negligent on my part and on the part of the local government.

My opinion carries no worth in a news story. It's a parasite if it appears outside of this opinion column. But in this specific spot, where I speak my mind, I'll say this: I am opposed to the burning of creosote-treated railroad ties as a fuel source in Madison County. I say this, because I just couldn't be OK with that next to my family. And when people living near GRP scream about this, I completely understand. I would feel panicked with that next to my asthmatic wife and my two children.

I come back to a fundamental dismay that this is even an issue. It feels absurd. In a broader scope, the burning of these ties is legal now and the foreseeable future. But this won't last. I don't know how long it will take the big ship of government to correct its course on this. But it's going to be outlawed again. To consider this a "green" source of energy creation is a kind of blasphemy, a middle finger to common sense. All the talk of it being legally OK and allowed by the federal government is hollow. It's a sham. It's not OK. We all know it.

We are supposed to trust in the machinery, to trust in the permits, to trust in the regulations. It's hard to afford such blind trust these days. It just is. It's especially hard for the people who breathe in the creosote and are supposed to just accept it as "not a problem" because the federal government approved it as OK.

It's also hard to trust the "nothing-to-see-here" attitude after reading the 89-page Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) complaint in federal court filed by the people who were hired to help this company secure foreign investment. Those consultants needed all the details they could get to present the plans. And when they pointed out misrepresentations about the capabilities of the power plants, they were fired, not thanked for catching problems. It's hard to read that complaint, with all of its many details, and not conclude that fierce skepticism of this company is warranted.

Understand, I'm not publishing that RICO story to take a shot at a company. I'm publishing it because the information exists in the public domain, and that suit is very relevant to what is happening in our county, as it grapples with how much trust to put in the new power plant. Read it and form your own conclusions. And if you find fault with how it's presented, point it out, please. I want to know.

But I've thought a lot about GRP's perspective here, too, especially as it relates to the railroad ties and its investments.

All health issues aside, and purely in a financial sense, GRP would do really well to burn only railroad ties. The projected cost of the Colbert and Carnesville plants was \$350 million, according to a GRP official quoted in Biomass Magazine. That's a massive investment, and the company must present the appearance of true profitability to get the funds it needs.

If the company transports its fuel source by highway, then it has a hefty trucking expense. I don't know any numbers, but it's surely not cheap. So whatever can be transported by railway is cheaper, especially if CSX has an interest in unloading its debris (railroad ties) at the plant as a convenient disposal source. This is obviously great for GRP in terms of operating expense. But there's a secondary economic boost for the company with railroad ties as a fuel source: it significantly brightens the projected economic profitability for the plant in Colbert. It means that GRP can tell investors that they have vastly reduced projected expenses. That means investors can then feel more confident in getting a return on their dollar. Likewise, if this all gets to be too much for GRP and they try to sell these plants and jump ship, then they need to show prospective buyers that the easy fuel source will help guarantee profitability.

This is why company assurances that the creosote isn't an issue are hard to stomach. They truly need it not to be an issue for their own financial health.

Right now, Madison County neighbors simply can't abandon their senses: smell, sight and sound. And it's not right to ask them to.

And there's also that other sense, the notion that this just doesn't feel right.

Yes, bringing business into Madison County is important. The county is woefully lacking in commercial tax revenue, which puts a burden on property owners. But bringing in business that comes to define an area by its pollution, not its attributes, well, that's actually bad for the area's business outlook in the long run. County leaders must balance their desire for new revenue with their duty to protect local citizens facing an actual health risk. I don't see how the scale falls on the GRP side at the moment. They have a lot of cleaning up to do to earn this county's trust.

That's not anti-business. It's just pro-fact.

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