

## Marion County officials consider waste-to-energy options

By PRAKASH GANDHI

**M**arion County wants to build a waste-to-energy plant to deal with its solid waste. County staff have projected that Baseline Landfill near Ocala will reach capacity within six or seven years.

So now, the county commission has given the go-ahead to its consultants to take proposals for a new waste-to-energy facility.

But the proposed plant will not be like most waste-to-energy facilities that burn solid waste to produce electricity, said Ken Whitehead, the county's solid waste manager.

Instead, the plant would use a process called gasification in which garbage is heated without oxygen until it's broken down to mostly carbon monoxide and hydrogen, which are then burnt to create energy.

"The board of county commissioners is extremely interested in alternative waste-to-energy technology," Whitehead said. "They are looking for a non-conventional waste-to-energy facility."

The county commission has asked consultants from the firm S2Li to look for any potential vendors to build the plant.

Among those who have shown interest is Horizon Energy Group of Tennessee, which has signed a deal with Progress Energy Florida to supply the utility with 60 megawatts of electricity, enough to power 40,000 homes.

Horizon has assured officials that it has \$100 million in financing to build the facility, thus saving the county the construction costs.

Horizon has also pledged to charge the county just \$10 a ton—about one-fourth what the county charges other people to dump at Baseline—for its trash, provided the county can furnish four acres at Baseline for the plant and supply at least 400 tons of trash per day to operate it.

"The vendor has said this type of technology is cheaper and cleaner than a traditional waste-to-energy facility," Whitehead said. "Hopefully, the proposals we receive will demonstrate that."

Horizon has told officials that all of the county's garbage could be disposed of at the plant, which the county hopes to have on-line within two to three years, Whitehead said.

He said the county commission is looking for a long-term disposal option. Still, the jury is still out on the technology, he believes. "I haven't seen anything yet that demonstrates that this has worked on a large scale," said Whitehead.

He says the county has seen an increase in the amount of residential trash generated,

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but the amount of commercial garbage is decreasing.

Last year, a former commissioner proposed that by 2013, the county build a waste-to-energy plant, whose price tag could approach \$200 million. Commissioners backed off the plan because of the price and the uncertainty of the technology.

In June, they chose to fill Baseline to capacity and haul the garbage elsewhere.

A new landfill will be planned in case the WTE facility fails to pan out, commissioners agreed. "If the request for propos-

als yields no suitable proposal, the board has directed to staff to begin the process of siting a new landfill," he said.

Commissioners have also agreed to explore the consolidation of recycling materials, as opposed to separating them. This move could save \$190,000 a year, according to Whitehead.

In addition, the county wants to analyze mandating universal garbage collection within urbanized areas to include curbside recycling pick-up, and close some recycling centers, especially in urbanized areas where service from trash companies is available.