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Home | **Opinion**

Editorial: Restoring trust

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There's no doubt that Gainesville Regional Utilities officials have lacked transparency in their effort to cushion the impact of rate increases when the biomass plant comes online.

A less charitable interpretation would be that GRU worked in secret to develop a plan that ignored city ordinances guiding the use of a fuel adjustment charge levied on electric customers.

For about three years, GRU has charged customers more than the actual cost of the fuel used in its power plants. It has built up nearly \$24 million in a fund that will limit the rise in rates from the biomass plant, which comes online in the fall.

GRU officials didn't publicly acknowledge the practice until last summer. In March, the city attorney found that the charge's use to build the reserve is allowed but stopped short of saying the practice complies with ordinances.

Biomass critics have called for all the money collected by the overcharge to be immediately refunded to GRU customers. This would mean a windfall in their bills now, only for them to see more dramatic rate increases when the biomass plant comes online in a few months.

While there's merit to giving customers back their money, critics seem to have a political motivation in wanting rates to be as bad as possible as soon as possible. It makes sense to buy some time in the hopes that the developments like President Obama's climate change regulations will lower rates in a few years.

A more reasonable idea is dropping the fuel charge in the remaining months before the plant comes online. City Commissioner Todd Chase has said that stopping the higher charge now makes sense because the fund is beyond the \$21.8 million it was projected to reach by the end of the fiscal year.

The commission is expected to consider the idea at its July 18 meeting. It would inspire greater confidence in its decisions regarding GRU by ending the questionable practice as soon as possible.

In the current environment, it's hard to have a reasonable debate about GRU. While critics like to blame the commission, there's no doubt that their sometimes ugly and personal criticism of GRU has lowered the level of discourse.

That said, members of the commission's majority are in denial if they think that no mistakes have been made with the biomass plant and utility's contract with the entity running it. Decisions on the size of the plant and length of the contract seem unwise in retrospect, even if Obama's plan improves the likelihood of selling the plant's excess energy.

All parties must now push the reset button and simply look at the best options moving forward. One big decision will be whether to adjust GRU's transfer to city coffers as a way of mitigating rate impacts. It seems tone deaf that the proposed city budget would increase the transfer at a time when utility revenues have declined and the biomass plant causes uncertainty.

GRU officials likely had the best motives in using the fuel adjustment to limit rate increases, but they worked behind closed doors and failed to follow the letter of the law. Stopping the practice as soon as possible will help restore trust that utility practices will be more transparent moving forward.



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