

Polls show coal-plant vote should be a real nail-biter

By Bill Cotterell
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Two new polls — one done professionally over the Internet, the other conducted by college students as a journalism project — indicate that Tallahassee's coal vote is too close to call.

Undecided voters will tip the balance, if they make up their minds and mail in their ballots, leaders of both surveys said. But on an emotional issue involving the environment, use of public money and public skepticism over big new expenditures, undecideds usually go against a proposition.

The "Tallahassee Voices" survey by Kerr & Downs Research, conducted by e-mail last weekend, showed 53-percent support for and 47-percent opposition to city participation in a consortium planning to build the coal-fired generating plant in Taylor County. But Phillip Downs, a



partner in the firm, said that those totals include people "leaning" one way or the other — and that people who haven't made up their minds by now are statistically more likely to vote "no."

He likened the situation to referendums on city-county consolidation.

"Surveys on consolidation over the past 25 years consistently showed support for consolidation, yet the issue never passed," Downs said. "Emotional arguments against consolidation always won

THE POLLS

"Tallahassee Voices" survey by Kerr & Downs Research showed:

- 53 percent support it.
- 47 percent oppose it.

The FAMU poll found:

- 33.1 percent oppose it.
- 26.3 percent support it.

out over rational support on voting day."

The FAMU poll, developed by journalism graduate students with volunteer students calling 377 Leon County residents, showed 33.1-percent opposition to coal and 26.3-percent support for city involvement in the plant. But the poll had an 6-percent error margin, with 40 percent undecided.

"The undecided voters are the key to the election," said Michael

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Abrams, the professor who oversaw the student operation. "The opposition still has a slight lead but within the margin of error. Everything is up for grabs."

The *Tallahassee Democrat*, which has editorially endorsed the city's involvement in the coal plant, supported both polling operations but did not conduct the surveys or influence the results. The newspaper has an internship program with FAMU and provided phones for the students to make their evening calls, and the *Democrat* is a co-sponsor of "Tallahassee Voices" with Kerr & Downs.

The city mailed ballots to more than 100,000 residents. The deadline for returning them to Leon County Elections Supervisor Ion Sancho is 7 p.m. Thursday.

The Kerr & Downs poll indicated that 30 percent of

voters think the ballot language is confusing and that 30 percent think the City Commission "ducked the coal issue" by putting it to a referendum. But 40 percent liked the referendum, and many voters hoped the public can vote on future issues, such as requiring developers to include low-income housing in their plans; increasing the local sales tax to widen Capital Circle and make other transportation improvements; or replacing StarMetro (formerly TalTran) with a private company.

"I'm always suspicious of polls on local issues," said County Commissioner Bob Rackleff, who said he voted against the plant. "The public awareness isn't very high on this issue, so the 40 percent undecided (in the FAMU poll) doesn't surprise me. In fact, I think it's low."

Tallahassee Mayor John Marks, a supporter of the coal project, said, "With a lot of undecideds, it could go either way. The higher the turnout, I think, the more likely there will be a

"Yes" vote."

Downs said Internet polling is "the wave of the future." He said the 881 responses last weekend were "weighted" for proper demographic sampling, but there's no way to compute a margin of error. Downs said "purists for the old way" believe in telephone polling because not everyone has access to the Internet. But in Tallahassee, he said, about 80 percent of people can get online.

"The trouble with phones is that in this community, we have 10 or 15 percent of people with cell phones only and you can't reach them," he said. "Big corporations are doing Internet polling, and you're seeing it more in the political arena because it's quicker and cheaper."

Abrams said the FAMU poll was a good educational opportunity for the students, who used the Tallahassee phone book and sometimes added or subtracted a digit so they could randomly hit unlisted numbers. The poll was conducted Nov. 2-7.

Besides the coal referendum, about 52

percent of respondents in the FAMU poll said Bush should have nominated a woman to succeed Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, rather than Judge Sam Alito. The rest were evenly split between opposing such a nominee or being undecided.

On other points:

■ 57.1 percent said higher gasoline prices altered their lifestyles.

■ 56 percent said they have an emergency hurricane plan, but only 47.7 percent knew where the nearest emergency shelter was.

■ 54 percent think Tallahassee is not prepared for a major hurricane, while 24.1 percent think it is.

■ 50.7 percent think they get enough exercise, while 48 percent said they don't — and 23 percent said they don't exercise at all.

■ 50.2 percent got most of their news from television, while 29.5 percent rely on newspapers and 11.7 percent get it from the Internet.

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