

TallahasseeVoices

Survey on the Coal Plant Proposal

Summary: Leon County residents remain highly divided on whether the City of Tallahassee should partner with other utilities to build a coal-fired power plant in nearby Taylor County. A number of considerations appear to influence public opinion on the City's involvement and the consequences of a partnership. These include environmental and economic concerns, the inevitability of the plant being built, and a related 1992 referendum.

Background on the Issue: The City of Tallahassee currently depends on natural gas for all of its energy needs. This causes the City to be at the mercy of the gas market and to experience spikes in energy costs over the past few years. In efforts to diversify energy resources, the City Commission is considering a proposal to partner with other utilities in building a coal-fired power plant in nearby Taylor County. The initial costs of this would be between \$3-\$6 million for the design and permitting phase. This would not obligate the City to become a full partner in the project, but it guarantees Tallahassee a chance to participate in the project in the future. In phase two, Tallahassee would invest around \$300 million toward building the coal-fired electricity plant. This is approximately 20% of the total cost (\$1.4 billion) and would guarantee the City 20% of the power generated from the plant. Supporters claim the plant will significantly reduce utility costs for residents. Opponents claim that burning coal releases dangerous toxins into the environment and that it is not worth the health risks. Regardless of Tallahassee's participation in the project, the plant is expected to be built and operational by 2012. Therefore, the environmental and health risks will exist with or without Tallahassee's participation. Closely related to this question is a 1992 referendum that mandates that the city get voter approval before building or buying any coal-fired energy in Leon or adjacent counties. The referendum does not apply in this case, given that Taylor County is not technically adjacent to Leon County (it is separated by about 45 miles of another county). The referendum was popularly supported in 1992, and former City Commissioner Jack McClean lost a bid for reelection due to his support for coal.

Summary of Findings: The first reactions of Leon County residents to building a coal plant were nearly equally divided between those in favor (32%), those opposed (33%) and those unsure about the issue (36%). After receiving information about the coal plant proposal and its different aspects, support dropped slightly to 31% while opposition rose to 44%. Perhaps counter-intuitively, opposition to the plan increased even further to 48% when people were asked, "If you knew that building the coal plant would decrease your personal utility costs by at least 10% year would you support or oppose..." This could be due to the fact that more than half (52%) of respondents reported being unaffected in terms lifestyle by recent spikes in energy costs.

However, support for building a coal plant did grow when people were told that the plant is going to be built with or without Tallahassee's partnership in the project. If the plant is inevitable, 51% of residents believe that the City should get involved so that we can benefit from the energy resources. Still, 49% remained unconvinced that the City should be involved, even if the plant is bound to be built regardless, based on the fact that the project is environmentally unfriendly.

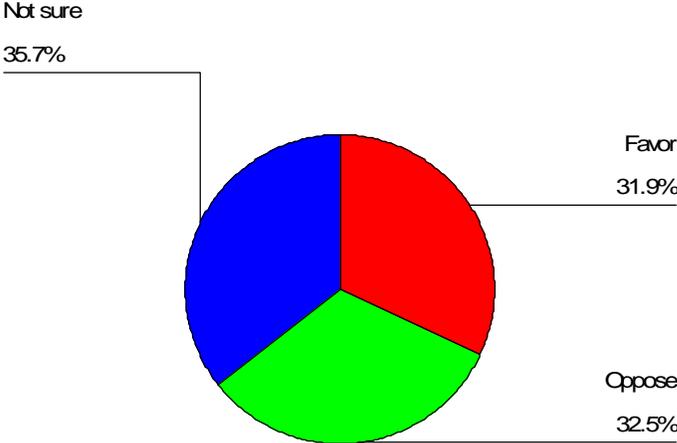
What alternatives would Tallahassee residents prefer to see, in terms of developing alternative energy resources? 11% believe the US should drill for oil off the coasts. 1 in 10 report that we should invest in nuclear energy plants. Only 4% cited coal as the most favored option, compared to an overwhelming 63% who prefer to look toward renewable energy sources such as solar, hydro, or ethanol, for power.

Although the 1992 referendum does not apply to the building of this particular plant, 47% of Tallahassee residents feel that this proposal violates the spirit of the referendum (42% do not). Further, although voters will not have a formal say in the building of this coal partnership, residents could use this issue as a basis for their votes in future City Commission races. However, it does not appear that most residents will do this. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents said that City Commissioners should not be kicked out of office based on their votes on this issue.

Data: Results are from a July 2005 *TallahasseeVoices* Internet Survey Panel, a pro-bono project jointly sponsored by Kerr & Downs Research and the *Tallahassee Democrat*. The panel contains over 2,500 local residents. 785 responded to this survey. The panel is weighted to be representative of Leon County demographics. In this survey, the panel included 37% minority respondents (African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians), 40% residents under the age of 35, and 24% low-income households.

Initial Approval

Do you favor or oppose the City of Tallahassee entering into a partnership with other utilities to build a coal-fired electricity plant in nearby Taylor County?



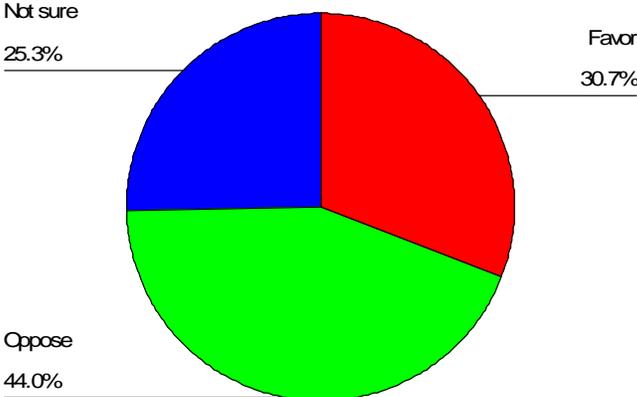
Approval after Information

As you may know, the City of Tallahassee relies on natural gas for nearly all of our electricity needs.

In order to lessen our dependence on the natural gas market, some residents feel that the City should invest in a partnership with other utilities to build a coal-fired electricity plant in Taylor County (which is not adjacent to Leon County). They say that this will protect residents against future increases in already spiking utilities costs, and they say it will protect Tallahassee against possible energy shortages and brownouts.

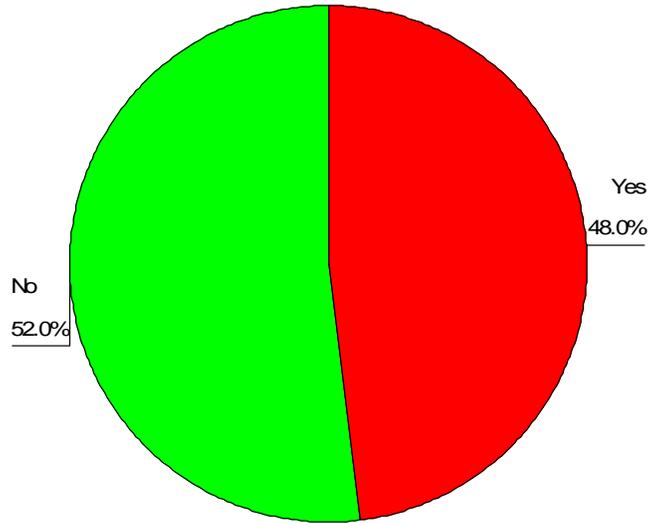
Other residents feel that a coal-fired electricity plant represents a significant environmental risk. They note that burning coal releases sulfur, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and mercury into the air and water, and that this is associated with a number of health problems. Engineers say that the new coal-burning technologies are far safer than in previous years, but opponents maintain that the process is still not clean enough.

Given this information, do you favor or oppose the City of Tallahassee entering into a partnership with other utilities to build a coal-fired electricity plant in Taylor County?



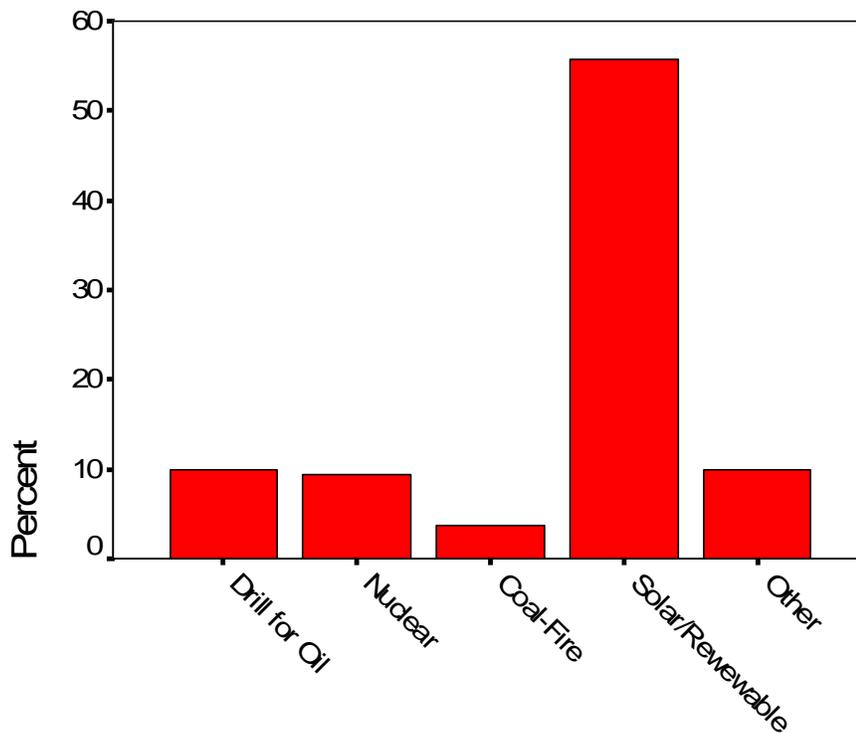
Impact of Energy Costs on Respondent's Lifestyle

Have increases in energy and utility prices prevented you from buying or doing things that you would have liked to do?



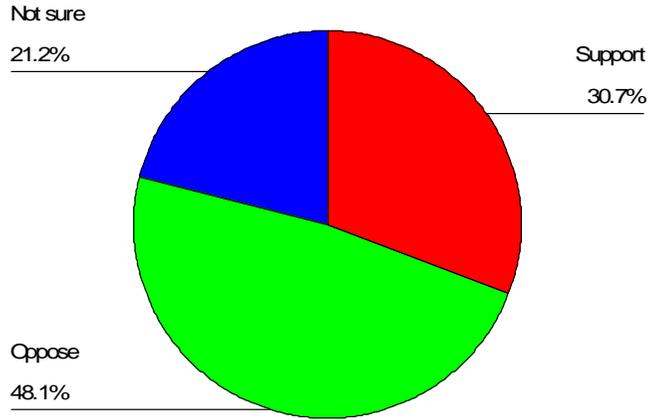
Preferred Alternatives for Energy Resources

What is the best way for the US to ensure a reliable supply of affordable energy?



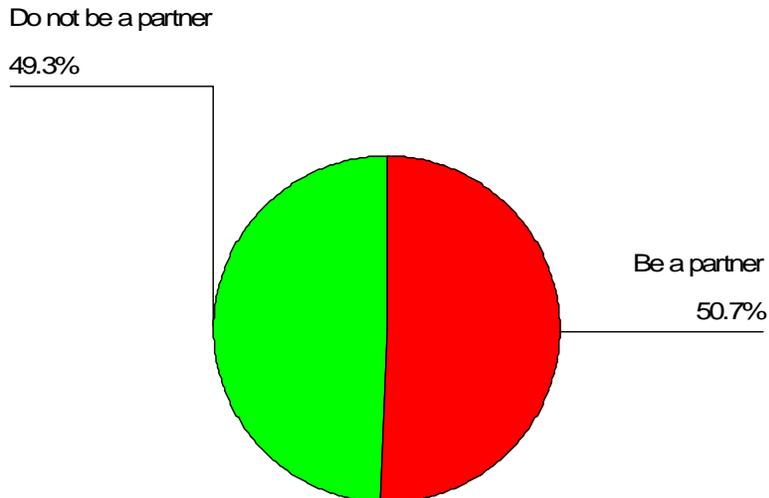
Economic Benefits vs. Health Risks?

Despite environmental and health costs, if you new that building the coal plant would decrease your personal utility costs by at least 10% each year, would you support or oppose Tallahassee's participation in the project?



If the Coal Plant Project is Inevitable?

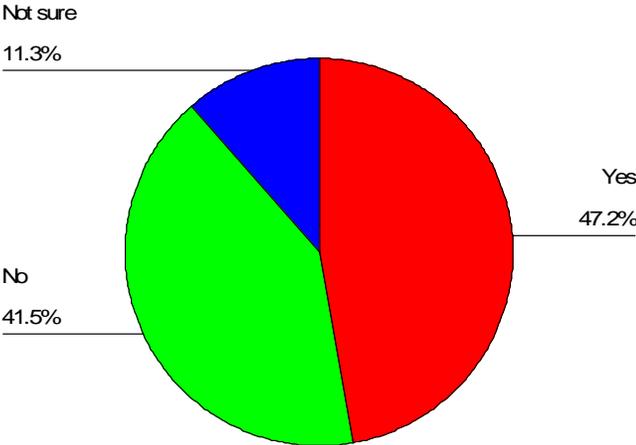
The coal plant is going to be built in a North Florida county regardless of whether Tallahassee joins the partnership or not. Some people feel that because the plant is inevitable, we should partner in the project and benefit from the electricity that is generated. Others argue that we should not support coal-fired plants no matter what, because of the environmental and health impacts. With which group do you agree?



The 1992 Referendum

In 1992 Tallahassee voters approved a referendum that requires City Commissioners to obtain voter approval before they build a coal plant in Leon County or in any county adjacent to Leon County. The proposed coal plant is not technically covered by the 1992 referendum since Taylor County is not adjacent to Leon County, however the County is only 45 miles away.

Do you feel that City Commissioners would be violating the spirit of the 1992 referendum if they voted for Tallahassee to partner in the coal plant?



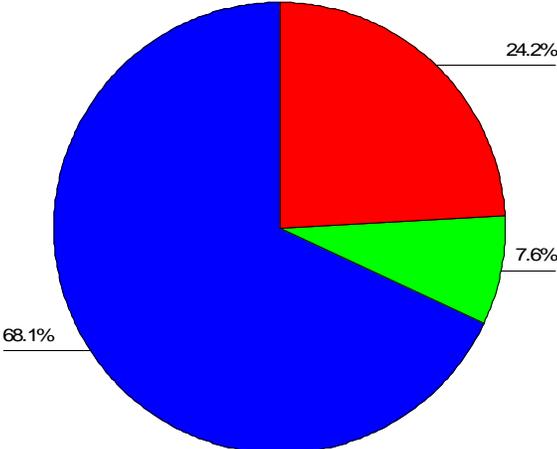
Influence of This Issue on Future City Commission Races?

Though Tallahassee residents will not be able to have a direct vote in whether the City should partner in the coal plant, they will be able to cast votes in the next City Commission race. Which of the following best matches your opinion about consequences for City Commissioners when voting on this issue?

Red= Commissioners voting in favor of the coal plant should be voted out of office because they are helping destroy our environment and health.

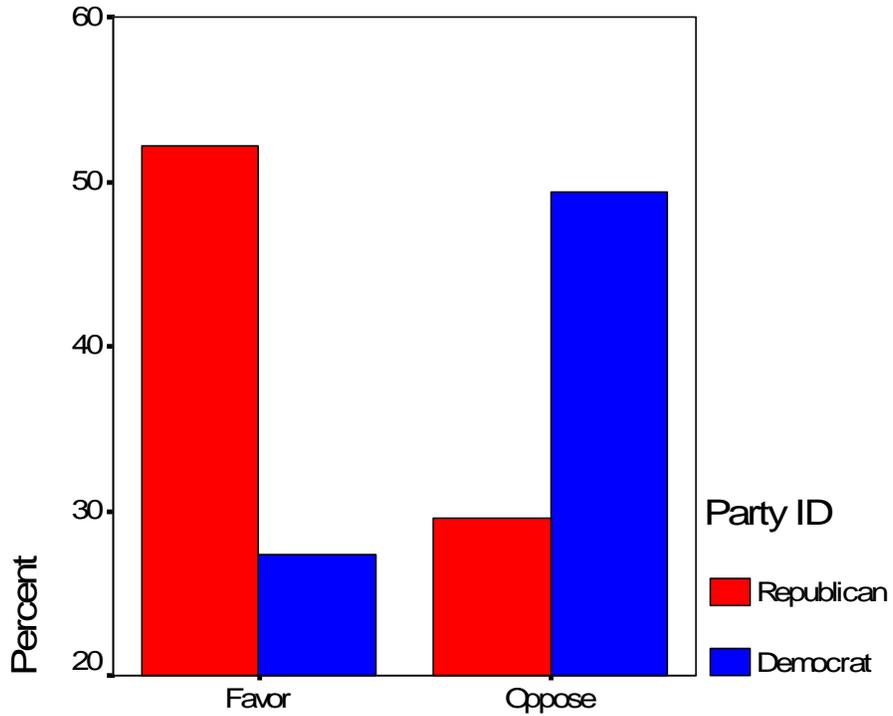
Green= Commissioners voting against the coal plant should be voted out of office because they are shirking their responsibility to provide a reliable supply of affordable power to residents.

Blue= Commissioners should not be voted out of office for their vote on this issue regardless of whether they vote for or against the power plant.



Differences in Opinion Based on Political Identification

Do you favor or oppose the City of Tallahassee entering into a partnership with other utilities to build a coal-fired electricity plant in Taylor County?



Differences in Opinion Based on Gender

Do you favor or oppose the City of Tallahassee entering into a partnership with other utilities to build a coal-fired electricity plant in Taylor County?

