



October 18, 2009

House to hear drilling debate

*By Jim Ash
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The think tanks are humming, big oil is gushing money, some polls suggest the public is primed — and environmentalists are nervous.

The debate over offshore drilling in Florida is about to enter a new and more intense phase beginning this week when a House panel conducts the first hearing before the spring session.

On Wednesday, the Select Policy Council on Strategic and Economic Planning will spend half a day focusing on a fundamental question — whether Florida should even consider the idea.

"We want to seek public input," said Rep. Dean Cannon, the speaker designate and the chief House sponsor of the drilling proposal. "Should we move forward with this? Some folks say no, some folks say yes. I want to make sure everybody has an opportunity to be heard."

Subsequent committee hearings will focus on the technical and financial aspects, Cannon said.

On Oct. 28, Cannon and other proponents will square off with opponents for a two-hour debate sponsored by Florida State University and Gannett Co., Inc., publisher of the *Tallahassee Democrat*. The event will be held before a live audience, and the panel will take questions from the public there and from the Internet.

On Nov. 2, FSU's Institute for Energy Systems, Economics and Sustainability hosts a scientific symposium, an open, but ticketed event for which seats cost \$50. The forum is being touted as a detached scientific look at the issue, and the panel includes an administrator with the federal Minerals Management Service.

Meanwhile, the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida, a policy arm of the Florida Legislature, is working the issue. Commissioners plan to have their work done well ahead of session.

Cannon and his counterpart, Senate President-designate Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, pledge a transparent and methodical review. It's an about face from earlier this year, when a drilling amendment surfaced in the waning days of the session, passed the House after a single committee hearing and was stopped cold by Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach.

Mason-Dixon pollster Brad Coker suggests that pro-drilling forces face a narrow window to push a controversial agenda.

A Mason-Dixon poll conducted April 15-16 for pro-drilling Associated Industries of Florida found that 59 percent of Floridians support drilling as a general concept, with 28 percent opposed.

Support zoomed to 79 percent when the surveyors mentioned new revenue for schools, public health and environmental programs. It hit 83 percent when surveyors mentioned the creation of thousands of jobs.

Floridians are battered by record unemployment — it hit 11 percent in September with more than 1 million out of work — and still reeling from last summer's \$4-a-gallon gas, Coker said.

"This is the best time to sell it if you're going to get it through," he said. "Once the economy improves and the jobs come back and the gas prices stabilize, the numbers will come back down."

Internal polling by a consortium of environmental groups paints a different picture, said Eric Draper, a chief drilling opponent and lobbyist for Audubon of Florida.

A "slim majority" of Floridians may be willing to consider offshore drilling, "but when they learn that it's 10 miles from shore, support shrinks. When they learn that the people behind it aren't all known, support wilts," he said.

As the momentum for drilling appears to build, opponents are worried that the deck is being stacked against them. Florida Energy Associates, a group pushing drilling, has already written checks for tens of thousands of dollars to both political parties. It has hired a prominent Tallahassee PR firm, and its list of lobbyists stood at 30 late last week.

Sen. Alex Diaz de la Portilla, the Republican leader from Miami, was recently appointed to chair a key energy committee. Diaz de la Portilla's wife works for a national lobbying firm that counts Florida Energy Associates as a client. Former House Speaker John Thrasher, a Republican from Jacksonville, just won a special election to replace former Sen. Jim King, who died of cancer. Thrasher was a chief lobbyist for Florida Energy Associates.

"These people should say, 'Look, I'm too close to the issue, I ought to pull back,' " Draper said.

Diaz de la Portilla says there's no reason for concern. He and his wife were well along their career paths before they married and they welcome the additional scrutiny, he said. He has voted against his wife's clients in the past and will always be willing to do so, he said.

"I've been very transparent and very open, and I always vote on issues based on the merits, not who the lobbyist is," Diaz de la Portilla said.
