



Friends of Lake Tahoe

P.O. Box 1464

Tahoe City, CA 96145

www.friendsoflaketahoe.org

info@friendsoflaketahoe.org FB: Friends of Lake Tahoe

May 11, 2011

To the Honorable Jack Duran, Robert M. Weygandt, Jim Holmes, Kirk Uhler, and Jennifer Montgomery

... a biomass energy facility may accomplish several goals. If it is found to reduce overall air pollution while reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires, then an environmental benefit would be realized.

Placer BOS's Editorial, May 9, 2001

Hello,

First, I would like to express my thanks to the Board, particularly the Chair, for the gracious courtesy of allowing me time to complete my thoughts at your meeting a few weeks ago at Northstar. As a follow-up to that meeting and to provide greater clarity regarding my concerns about both the biomass burning power plant proposed for Kings Beach and my worries about governmental credibility and transparency, I hope you will grant me here a few additional moments *in writing* to review my primary concerns.

As I mentioned at that time, I am a retired political science professor. My entire adult life has been dedicated to public service in a conscientious effort to help people both understand and appreciate government at all levels. It is for this reason that this letter is **not** written as a complaint, but rather to explain a worrisome governmental systemic problem that revealed itself as I became involved with the biomass project. We all want good government and I can find no fault with the Board or its members; rather, I believe, there is a problem with the operational system that is causing problems of confusion and therefore governmental credibility and transparency.

You might recall at the Northstar meeting I mentioned that I believed each of you is, in my opinion, overworked, underpaid, and inadequately appreciated. While this is common for many governmental officials, it is still troubling in that it can contribute to the problem I want to review and hopefully explain. You are each very busy and have more on your respective governmental plates than most can imagine, and that is after all that you must do to make a living. You are short on time and I am not helping by writing this letter and stealing more time from you. (My hope, however, is that, upon its completion, you will feel it was a worthy read.)

What this means, in general, is that you must rely on quick briefings from multiple staff members in a

variety of departments across the county for information upon which to make decisions. Often the topics are complicated. And, in spite of one's best efforts to be objective at all times, people bring preconceived notions about reality to any briefing and can suffer from a form of cognitive dissonance when information in the briefing clashes with those preconceived beliefs. The public's confusion with the issues that underlie the biomass project seems particularly to reflect such impediments to analysis. Consequently, you have the double task of understanding and explaining to the public these issues. And, if you fail on either account, you are held responsible. It is a tough and usually thankless job.

In this context, I worry that you, and, by extension, the County, have problems of credibility and transparency regarding the biomass project, not resulting from any particular failure on your part, but rather the circumstances surrounding the issue. And, I believe the problem is becoming exacerbated with the passage of time and the issues become clearer to more people.

Here, in a nutshell, as best I can present them, are the misunderstandings that plague this issue and cause the problem of credibility: There is a belief among many that having a biomass burning power plant in the Lake Tahoe Basin will solve some long standing environmental problems. *These include the problems of open burning, forest fuel reductions, and the threat of catastrophic wildfires.*

The reason for the belief that a plant will greatly mitigate, if not eliminate, these problems has to do partly with the way it has been presented by the spokespersons for the County both in writing and at public gatherings. While it has not *ipso facto* been stated that a plant in the Basin will greatly ameliorate these problems, it has been suggested by innuendos, thereby allowing the reader or listener to connect dots incorrectly about reality when reaching their own conclusions.

I worry about this not only because it promotes misperceptions that can result in approval of the plant for all the wrong reasons, but also because of the disillusionment that will follow upon the realization by the public down the road that they were "allowed" to misunderstand the situation. We already have enough problems of such disillusionment. Few will believe that you and the County simply erred unintentionally in allowing false hopes and expectations to become associated with the building of such a plant. The public will feel duped. There is already too much suspicion of government to add another layer. Allowing false beliefs to metastasize will harm your credibility with other issues and concerns.

Essentially, a biomass burning plant, regardless of its location, does little in and of itself to reduce open burning. There will always be some open burning due to the inaccessibility of forest waste for removal. The absence of roads, steep inclines, and other ecological reasons all mandate occasional open burning. Yet, the juxtaposition of information regarding open burning versus controlled combustion presented by the county both in its website and at public gatherings suggests otherwise. No one contests the fact that controlled combustion is cleaner than open burning but the seductive contrast is misleading and disingenuous. A biomass plant will not mitigate open burning. Indeed, we fully expect this issue to be a major theme in the EIS/EIR when it is factually irrelevant. Were, of course, Placer County to chip and *haul to Cabin Creek for processing* an occasional pile that they could actually access that otherwise might be burned would be delightful. And, while one might argue that sometimes they do exist, they are truly so few in number as to not warrant comment.

Similarly, forest fuel reduction activities have become central to the fear of catastrophic wildfires (and fear is a powerful motivator). The problem, however, which is well understood by fire fighting professionals, is that neither such activities nor wildfires have anything to do with biomass plants. Forest fuels removal is quite simply the result of the subsidies that finance them, such as the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2011. More funding equals more removal, less open burning, and fewer wildfires. A biomass plant has nothing to do with such governmental subsidies and if it did, it would apply to Cabin Creek as well as Kings Beach.

Unfortunately, people are also being allowed to make judgments based upon incomplete information that leads them to conclude that green forest waste chipped in the field could then be taken *directly* to a biomass plant to be mixed with dry, processed biomass fuel and burned, when this is not the case. This is simply not true. Biomass fuel must be screened to rigid specifications in order to be burned in a state of the art controlled combustion plant. Moreover, the amount of screened green waste that can be mixed and burned is so miniscule as to be negligible. Not even your consultants, TSS, have either mentioned or supported such a concept as viable, yet it is suggested as a planned practice of substantial importance in public meetings. The screening and processing occurs at Cabin Creek. I am distressed when I see government agencies nurture false conclusions when one of their primary responsibilities is to explain reality rather than obfuscate it. It constitutes a violation of a public trust.

The reason that a location in the Basin was selected in the first place was because of the belief that permits could be obtained easier there than elsewhere in the County. The air is cleaner in the Basin and the TRPA can minimize the involvement of EPA, thereby lowering the bar. That's all. The rest is simply smoke and mirrors that offers false hopes for long standing problem solving that won't occur.

And, while I can't delineate the responsible party, but I suspect you can, the promotion of the Kings Beach location in association with supportive *partnerships* identified in the NOP that don't exist, is a reflection of this problem and constitutes a serious breach of governmental protocol and public trust. I mentioned at Northstar that it was this false claim expressed in a government document issued by two governmental agencies and ostensibly written by Ascent Environmental that prompted my involvement in this issue and the creation of Friends of Lake Tahoe as a 501 C4 non-profit, public benefit corporation. The staffs of both Placer and TRPA proofed that document and signed off on it. And, you must remember that they did that in your names and the leadership of the TRPA also. I find that very troubling and hope that you do as well.

In my quest to learn more about this topic and to assess public opinion, I found that many well educated, thoughtful, bright, and caring individuals harbored the very same misperceptions that I have related here about biomass plants and the issues of open burning, forest waste removal, and wildfires. And, part of this I am afraid is the result of an emphasis upon "sales" over "substance" in the "marketing" of the plant. I am an educator and political analyst. As such, I do not want to leave any confusion in anyone's about this. Consequently, I would be happy to discuss these matters at greater length with any of you at any time.

A biomass plant at Cabin Creek would be fine. A biomass plant at Kings Beach would be a disaster not

only for the environment but also for the matter of governmental trust. Trust, once lost, can be elusive. No one has the recipe for how to reestablish trust once lost in a marriage, family, business, or government. It is a very worrisome concern.

Respectfully,

Roger Patching, CEO/President
Friends of Lake Tahoe