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Column: FutureGen 'game' is over, Texas says

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Apparently, the suspense of where FutureGen will be located is “over.”

According to some folks in Texas, it's all over but the shoutin'.

And it's not because Illinois' officials have been bickering over budget control for several months.

According to the Odessa American newspaper, Texas made a “Best and Final Offer” of almost \$1 billion to land the \$1.5 billion coal-fired power plant of the future.

“Those numbers are what signifies game over,” FutureGen Texas Director Scott Tinker told the Odessa newspaper earlier this month.

Odessa and Jewett, Texas, are competing with Mattoon and Tuscola here in East Central Illinois for the prototype plant.

While Illinois officials have been quiet regarding Mattoon's and Tuscola's “Best and Final” offers, Tinker said higher energy receipts in Texas, \$240 million in tax credits, local markets for carbon dioxide, hydrogen and slag byproducts, tax abatements and \$20 million from the state to offset construction costs will total almost \$1 billion.

And Odessa Economic Development Director Neil McDonald told the Odessa Development Corp. board that “estimates” show Futuregen would lose up to \$4 million in its fourth year and even more later if FutureGen officials pick Illinois over Texas.

McDonald also said that “graphs” indicate FutureGen would turn a \$9 million profit in its fourth year if it goes to Texas.

But no one said where those “estimates” and “graphs” came from.

Understandably, Angela Griffin, president of Coles Together, isn't conceding the contest.

“I've seen that \$1 billion figure flashed around for a while,” she said last week. “I haven't seen or read that it's \$1 billion cash on the table if (FutureGen officials) select Texas.”

Of the local sites' “Best and Final” offers, Griffin said Illinois has “put together a comprehensive package.”

“Our proposal is clear, concise and complete, and it addresses the major needs that FutureGen has,” she said. “I haven't gotten the impression that (FutureGen) is a project that can be bought.

“If the geography is right, if the science is right and if the site meets all the needs to put the project on the ground, then that's where FutureGen is going to go,” Griffin said.

“I just don't think the first-of-its-kind, gold-standard demonstration project that the world will be watching can be bought.”

One advantage Texas might have over Illinois is its political climate.

To be honest, I have no idea what political squabbles have been happening in Texas.

But few would argue that it's been chaotic in Springfield this year with all the top state officials from the same party scuffling like school boys to see who controls the playground.

The governor finally signed the budget this week, almost three months after the legislative session was supposed to end.

Is Springfield sending the wrong signal to FutureGen Alliance officials?

Just the opposite, Coles Together's Griffin maintains, because when lawmakers approved the liability protection for FutureGen this year, it garnered near-unanimous approval.

“It sends a very clear message that this is one project that is getting bipartisan support,” she offered. “It is supported by the leaders and by all four corners of the state.

“FutureGen is one of the few things they have been able to agree on when they can't agree on very many things,” she said.

Illinois is a coal state, she pointed out. Texas is an oil and gas state, even claiming FutureGen's carbon dioxide sequestration will help enhance oil recovery.

"When you look at the whole package — the geography, the infrastructure, Illinois' commitment to clean coal technology — the project can't be hijacked to enhanced oil recovery," Griffin said.

Regardless, FutureGen is definitely being counted on for future energy needs.

A recent report by the Electric Power Research Institute doesn't name FutureGen but does point to sequestration of carbon dioxide by future power plants.

According to the EPRI report, by the year 2020, 90 percent of all new coal plants will be capturing and storing 90 percent of the carbon dioxide they generate.

"Implicit in this assumption, therefore, is availability at commercial scale of (carbon dioxide) transport and storage in 2020 and thereafter," the report states.

And while we all are anxious to see which community is selected for the FutureGen prototype plant, we will have to wait until late this year.

At the summer hearings, I recall that the timeline calls for the Department of Energy to determine how many of the four finalists qualify and then the FutureGen Alliance officials are expected to name the site by late November.

In Texas, one official said the final decision has been pushed back to December.

But Lawrence Pacheco, who handles media inquiries, said there is no change in the timeline.

"The alliance will reveal the decision several weeks after the Department of Energy completes review of the Environmental Impact Statements and makes its Record of Decision," Pacheco said. "That is still expected to occur by the end of the year. It's always been by the end of the year."

I agree with Griffin that this project is too significant to be decided by anything but science. For that reason, I think Mattoon and Tuscola are still in the game.