

Mike Thomas

## COMMENTARY

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**In a most unlikely alliance, the enlightened purveyors of solar energy are joining forces with the dark lords of fossil fuels.**

The plan is to open up Florida's offshore water to oil drilling, then use some of the royalties to open up more rooftops to solar panels.

This is the brainchild of future House Speaker Dean Cannon of Winter Park.

Some might call it an ingenious ploy to drive a wedge between two renewable-energy camps: The true-believer granola greenies who despise fossil fuels, and the businesspeople who believe in green as long as that includes the greenbacks to meet next week's payroll.

The payroll argument is what Cannon used on the Florida Solar Energy Industries Association, a trade group of manufacturers, retailers, consultants and installers.

"We are more of an energy organization and not so much an environmental organization," says Bruce Kershner, the group's executive director.

But it's not a perspective shared by all.

Ed Strobel, president of Sunshine Solar Services in Fort Lauderdale, admits, "We are all in survival mode."

But, he adds, "I had to draw the line" — and resigned from Kershner's group.

It is a futile gesture.

The drilling rigs are coming. Cannon will push through the required legislation in the House. And his counterpart in the Senate will do likewise.

Gov. Charlie Crist is on board. It burnishes his conservative credentials. And diverting some of the royalties to renewable energy gives him some political cover.

Green drilling. What more could Charlie ask for?

It's a rare case of good politics creating good public policy.

If renewable energy is the future, we are living in the past. Florida is falling far behind other states in encouraging its development, meaning we will fall far behind in attracting the jobs it creates.

Utilities here have little incentive to promote solar energy.

Florida does not require that they generate a minimum percentage of their energy from renewable sources.

It does not require them to buy power from small solar plants at premium prices, which would encourage investors to build them.

These kinds of programs would raise utility rates, and the politicians aren't willing to go there.

Florida's only incentive is a rebate program. It kicks back about \$500 for solar hot-water heaters and up to \$20,000 for rooftop photovoltaic cells. But the fund went bust and had to be rescued with temporary stimulus dollars.

Kershner wants a dedicated funding source so the rebate program — and the solar business it generates — is not subject to the whims of budget writers.

Money from drilling also could be used to lure renewable-energy companies into Florida, creating next-generation research and manufacturing jobs.

That's the future. More pertinent to the present, drilling would create economic development and thousands of jobs.

Florida sits on a very unstable, two-legged economic stool: tourism and growth.

It has toppled because people are leaving instead of coming, and tourism has crashed.

We haven't been this deep in the Dumpster since the Great Depression. And we will be one of the last states out of this morass because our economy has little substance.

We need to diversify and create things that have real value.

And at least part of the answer is sitting offshore under the Gulf of Mexico.

Most of the energy down there is thought to be natural gas.

It is the cleanest of the fossil fuels, with half the carbon emissions of coal. This has created a worldwide demand for it. Use in Florida is skyrocketing because Crist has effectively banned new coal plants.

Extracting it off our coast would do no harm. It would not send tourists fleeing back to New Jersey. Yet foes keep dragging out that laughable argument for lack of a better one.

Natural gas is the perfect companion to solar energy.

The sun is a part-time source of electricity. It comes and goes with the clouds and time of day. It

requires backup to ensure the power grid doesn't run out of juice.

Natural-gas power plants ramp on and off very quickly. They are best at meeting sudden spikes in demand. And they are the cheapest plants to build.

There are some greenies who think if we simply stop drilling for fossil fuels, we magically will no longer require them.

In fact, we will.

This plan works for the present and, more important, it works for the future.

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