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Into the fire

What will Detroit do with its big burner?

By News Hits staff

One of **Dave Bing's** first big tests as mayor is going to involve a major issue that's received scant attention from the mainstream media: The Detroit waste-to-energy incinerator.

Last year, the City Council voted to stop sending trash to the Russell Street facility, declaring instead that it wanted to use a combination of landfills and stepped-up recycling to handle Detroit's garbage when the city's contract expires June 30.

If the council holds to that position, and the administration — through the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority, which is directed by a board of mayoral appointees — tries to continue using the incinerator, then things could get very interesting.

But that's a big if. For one thing, Ken Cockrel Jr. sided with incinerator opponents and voted with the majority as council president last year. But when he became mayor, Cockrel refused to give straight answers about his position on the incinerator, and his proposed budget includes funding for the incinerator, which produces electricity and steam.

Which way will Kenny lean now that he's back on the council?

Also, as a few council members pointed out following a public hearing on the budget last Friday — a session that featured a dozen opponents of the incinerator lining up to air their concerns about cost and health issues associated with the incinerator — facility operator Covanta has been approaching them in private, trying to win them over.

With Detroit expected to produce 300,000 tons of trash next year, plus another 75,000 tons of bulk waste and yard waste, disposing of it — according to the proposed budget — is expected to cost more than \$63 million next fiscal year.

A lot of money is at stake, and the people profiting from burning Detroit's garbage don't want to let go of it.

That public hearing was illuminating in another way. News Hits has been following the incinerator issue for more than a year now, and we get the repeated impression that a majority of the council doesn't really grasp the complexity of it all. During Friday's session — held as part of its budget process — council members were debating whether the facility is responsible for noxious smells.

Councilmember **Barbara-Rose Collins** started talking about what she perceived to be an unhealthy "mist" she's noticed around the plant. But this is a battle that won't be won on perceptions.

Councilmember **Martha Reeves**, looking supremely self-satisfied, talked about actually taking the time to tour the plant and being favorably impressed, and chided her fellow members for going off half-cocked and making a decision without being fully informed. News Hits has also taken that tour, and we too were impressed. The argument from pro-incinerator forces will be that the incinerator is clean, safe and cost-effective, turning garbage into electricity and steam.

But we've yet to see council engage in a debate that shows its members get all the nuances and complexities of the issue. As Council President **Monica Conyers**, who voted against the

incinerator last year, began ranting about all the stink emanating from the Marathon oil refinery and other polluters in southwest Detroit, and (unfairly) berating activists for not trying to address those problems as well, News Hits sat there dumbfounded that council paid zero attention to one aspect of the issue that isn't subjective: costs.

It's not like they didn't have fodder to work with. Brad van Guilder of the nonprofit Ecology Center had crunched the numbers provided in available budget documents and clearly laid out the financial consequences of incineration.

In a nutshell, van Guilder and other critics contend that incineration is much more expensive than landfilling.

For a city facing a \$300 million budget deficit, the cost of incineration — along with the health implications — should be a focal point of the debate.

How much does it really cost to incinerate our trash? And what are the prospective costs of dealing with carbon dioxide emissions, a factor sure to grow in significance as the pressure to address global warming pollutants increases?

But after van Guilder informed them burning the city's garbage will cost taxpayers more than \$62 per ton, compared to the \$25 to \$30 per ton it would cost the city to landfill its trash, the council talked only about whether the incinerator produces bad smells and noxious mists.

We called **John Prymack**, GDRRA's director, and he disputed van Guilder's calculations.

"The numbers are wrong," Prymack tells us, saying that van Guilder lumps expenditures like GDRRA's fledgling recycling program and bulk waste disposal in with incineration.

Grappling with the incinerator can be like trying to catch smoke in your hand. It always seems to be shifting shape and slipping through your fingers.

With the deadline just seven weeks away, bids from both landfill operators and the incinerator operator have reportedly just become public. According to Prymack, bids for both options range from about \$25 to \$28 per ton to dispose of Detroit's trash. According to the contract, if the incinerator can meet or beat the best price offered by landfills, the city is obligated to continue using the incinerator.

(News Hits just learned that the bids are available for public scrutiny and will attempt to review them this week.)

There's one more issue that, if nothing else, should royally piss off council members and taxpayers alike. Even if the \$25 to \$28 per ton number for incinerating Detroit trash is correct, private haulers pay, on average, less than \$15 per ton (van Guilder says his calculations show the number to be as low as \$12 per ton). That's because landfill rates are so low, those private haulers wouldn't be using the incinerator if they had to pay full cost. But the incinerator can't exist on Detroit garbage alone; it needs more than twice the amount the city sends it to produce that steam and electricity. So taxpayers, in effect, will apparently continue to subsidize private haulers, many of whom are bringing trash from the suburbs to be burned in Detroit.

"We're paying them to bring the problems of pollution to our community," is the way **Margaret Weber**, a staunch proponent of recycling, characterized the situation.

The flip side of that is the legal battle that could ensue if council does try to unilaterally cut off funding for the incinerator. In a letter to council, Prymack warned that could result in the city having to pay damages to the incinerator's owners of "at least \$40,000,000 to \$100,000,000."

Dave Bing now finds himself thrust into the cauldron of this debate. How he handles it will say a lot about what kind of mayor he will be.

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Comments

On 5/13/2009 1:20:47 PM, EastsideAlan said:

Why wont anyone post a copy of this alledged "contract" that has been refered to as the prevailing instrument that answers all questions? Some reports on this issue have said that the contract has expired. No contract can be extended in perpetuity as a matter of contract law. No contract can be enforced that is contrary to "State Interest". State interest is a legal ruling that is clearly defined by the Supreme Court. No contract can be made that is contrary to state or federal law. I repeat: Post the the alledged "contract" where everyone can read it and the content will speak for itself. If the contract is ambiguous, then it is void on its face as inconclusive, or have the courts quickly rule in a declarative judgement proceeding to end the confusion. It is clear that the city council cannot think collectively at this level so dont set them up for failure and set the residents for exploitation by allowing council to be a part of this judgement process.