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Critics rip agency as recycling falters

Mary Beth Pfeiffer
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The Dutchess County Resource Recovery Agency has proved it can do one thing well, even if not economically: It can burn trash.

An estimated 57 percent to 62 percent of waste produced in the county every year passes through the jaws of its giant incinerator on the Hudson River, and an agency consultant recently suggested expanding the plant to accommodate even more — an unlikely project that could cost \$125 million.

But while it has a solid record on burning, the agency — charged under its founding legislation to manage Dutchess County's waste — does not do as well in another area: It recycles only 4 percent of Dutchess' 250,000 tons of garbage, a consultant's report says. An estimated 30,000 tons of paper alone go to the trash heap yearly, and, according to officials and reports, little is done to encourage recycling in the county.

When waste recycled by private haulers is included, the county recycling rate is only 11 percent, about half the state rate, agency figures show.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Joel Tyner, D-Clinton, chair of a county legislative task force that has been harshly critical of what it calls the agency's "mismanagement" and its growing multimillion-dollar deficit. "The status quo at our RRA is unsustainable."

The agency's chief, William Calogero, acknowledged that he does not have an employee assigned full time to recycling on his seven-member staff — "there's just not enough going on in that area," he said — and that recycling education consists mainly of his speeches to civic groups and tours of the agency's Town of Poughkeepsie incinerator.

But he said recycling has flagged mainly because county government does not enforce a law that mandates separation of recyclables. County records show only one ticket issued for a violation of the recycling law since 2000.

"If that law was really followed," said Calogero, who receives \$108,000 a year as executive director of the agency, "it would increase the amount of waste that should be recycled."

Sandra Goldberg, D-Wappinger, and minority leader of the county Legislature, said such assertions are part of a pattern. "I sat at an RRA board meeting (recently)," she said. "Everything bad was not their fault. Everything was somebody else's fault."

Legislature Chairman Robert Rolison, R-Poughkeepsie, said there was "huge room for improvement" on recycling.

"I see an agency that's trying to work through these issues," he said, referring also to the agency's money problems. "We need to give them the assistance and support to make them a better operation."

RRA's track record

The agency's track record — environmentally as well as financially — is a key factor as Dutchess considers whether to adopt changes in trash management, including:

- A law mandating the flow of all waste generated in the county to the agency, guaranteeing a steady supply to burn even if haulers have cheaper alternatives.
- A yearly charge on all homes, businesses and tax-exempt properties, what the agency report calls a "green fee" but Democratic legislators dub a tax, to finance the burn plant's deficit as well as future disposal options such as expanding the facility.

Currently, the agency recycles 10,000 tons of waste annually at its materials recovery facility while burning 144,000 to 155,000 tons at the waste-to-energy plant, which also produces electricity.

Though the consultant's report advocates future waste reduction and composting — in unspecified ways — it nonetheless endorses the agency's historical handling of trash disposal.

The "agency's approach to solid waste management through waste-to-energy is fundamentally sound," the report states, noting the technology's benefits over burying waste.

The statement has some agency observers bristling, in view of the agency's low recycling rate and long track record of losing money — and because even the report notes that sending county waste to landfills would save money.

The agency's multimillion-dollar annual deficit — which by statute is paid by county taxpayers — has grown nearly sixfold since 2001 to a budgeted \$6.3 million for 2009, and the agency won't retire its debt on the 28-year-old plant until 2027, years beyond a dozen other plants surveyed by the Poughkeepsie Journal. This is proof to some that incineration here has failed.

"How can an approach be sound if it has caused permanent, unanticipated subsidies?" asked Neil Seldman, president of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a Washington-based environmental organization, who has advised county legislators on waste issues and thinks that composting, recycling and waste reduction are ultimately more cost-effective.

"Neither incineration nor landfilling is fundamentally sound," Tyner said. "Reusing materials saves much more energy than the incinerator creates," while having the benefit of creating jobs.

Calogero agrees with the need to maximize recycling but said the leftovers should be burned in a facility like his — "the most beneficial way of getting rid of it." The question is how much goes where.

The debate unfolding in Dutchess mirrors a larger statewide discussion on how to reduce waste, increase recycling and dispose of the rest in an environmentally friendly and fiscally prudent manner. And indeed, the state has suffered its own frustrations.

In 1988, the state set a goal to reduce, reuse or recycle half of its trash in a decade. Instead, waste output grew since then from 24 million tons to 30 million tons, and the state currently recycles only 20 percent of its municipal solid waste, "well below" the national average of 32 percent, according to a draft of the state's solid waste plan.

Dutchess fares even worse, however. Calogero put the county's municipal-recycling rate at about half the state's — 11 percent, or 27,000 tons annually. (The number differs from another agency tally of towns and businesses that is substantially higher; Calogero said it counts items like yard waste that should not be included.) Moreover, recyclables processed by the agency dropped by 4,400 tons, or 29 percent, since 2004.

Flow control urged

A way to make money and improve the share of trash recycled would be to enforce the county's recycling statute and enact a "flow control" law, Calogero said. The new measure would let the agency

dictate where trash would go, enabling it to enter into long-term agreements to sell recyclables by guaranteeing a steady supply, he said. It also would assure the burn plant of enough trash; it does not use its capacity to burn another 10,000 or so tons a year.

Environmentalists and others generally support the idea of flow control while noting pitfalls.

"If they do flow control with the idea to maximize waste reduction, do composting and recycling, it's different from if they want to do it to continue to operate a horrible incinerator," said Barbara Warren, executive director of the Albany-based Citizens Environmental Coalition.

"Flow control can be good for a municipality to hold their waste inside their jurisdiction," said Thomas Lauro, Westchester County commissioner of environmental facilities. But "if the facility is not being run on a somewhat efficient basis, holding the waste inside the jurisdiction could cause higher costs to ratepayers."

In other words, having a captive market, the agency could charge higher dumping fees at the burn plant, driving up the cost of residential and commercial collection, undercutting recycling with burning and perpetuating potential systemic inefficiencies.

"Maybe that's the way it was done 20 years ago," Calogero asserted of flow control, "but that's not the way it is today."

Flow control would allow more efficient and predictable budgeting, he said, and make recycling more profitable.

Moreover, Calogero maintained it would be in the agency's interest to winnow the expanded waste stream to an amount the incinerator can manage by doubling recycling rates and removing 30,000 to 40,000 tons of yard and food waste. If those yardsticks can be met — a big if — that would leave about 180,000 tons (a third of which would be left over as ash).

"Now, suddenly, it doesn't look like we're a far reach away from what this facility can handle," he said.

Recycling is top goal

The state's highest priority for managing trash is to reduce the amount generated, perhaps through programs in which homeowners pay to dispose of each bag of trash they produce. Tyner's task force found significant increases in recycling and decreases in trash output in communities using "pay-as-you-throw" strategies, methods Calogero refused even to entertain.

"I'm not going to get into that discussion," he said. "I don't have that responsibility to make you reduce. We can offer you suggestions to do that. Our agency was not asked to do that."

The agency is, nonetheless, the chief manager of Dutchess County's waste, holding great sway over how it is handled. The Web page for the Dutchess County Department of Solid Waste Management, for example, lists no county office or telephone number, instead referring visitors to the Resource Recovery Agency. The Journal asked County Executive William Steinhaus for comments on flow control, waste reduction, recycling and other issues, but received no response.

Aside from recovering more recyclables, the agency's report has no recommendations to reduce waste, focusing on more traditional approaches to trash management. It recommends improvements to the burn plant and possible expansion (a remote possibility, according to Rolison and others); addition of two or three transfer stations to take overflow waste to cheaper upstate landfills and development of a new "single stream" recycling facility where mixed bottles, paper, cans and glass would be separated. The \$12 million to \$13 million system, the report states, would reduce hauler costs and increase recovery of household recyclables that end up in trash.

The report also proposes a "green fee" or "environmental service charge" that it asserts would be "volume-based ... assessed against real properties in proportion to the amount of solid waste generated." While there would be different levels of payment — one each for one-, two- and

three-story homes, for example — observers dispute the fee's link to volume or the suggestion that it could encourage waste reduction.

"Two identical houses next door to each other will have the same tax, even if one recycles everything," said R. Stephen Lynch, a Millbrook-based solid waste consultant and agency board member who stressed he was not speaking for the board. "It is not volume-based."

Goldberg, the minority leader, said she does not support the user fee because "there is no recognition for the amount of waste a person or a property generates," and therefore no incentive to reduce.

Rolison, the Legislature chairman, said the fee "would lessen the tax burden (of the agency's subsidy) because people who currently aren't paying anything would," among them churches, prisons and schools. He agreed it would not reduce waste output — which, with recycling, is a high priority for him — and said the idea perhaps should wait until the county revises its trash master plan this year. "We don't know enough about it," he said.

Push for composting

Like the state's master plan, the agency's report endorses composting, which is seen as holding potential to recover organic-rich wastes — food is 17 percent of municipal trash — that impede waste burning and create greenhouse gases in landfills.

But the agency document suggests only that the county support — rather than undertake — "independent initiatives in green waste composting," such as small programs at local colleges.

"It should not be something totally absorbed by county government," said Calogero, who has met with nearby counties on the idea of a regional, privately run composting facility. "Our facility is not set up to do that sort of thing."

Tyner's legislative task force took a far different tack from the agency's, calling for waste reduction incentives, an overall county goal of 70 percent recycling by 2020 and efforts aimed at "substantially increasing our food waste composting infrastructure."

Shabazz Jackson, president of Greenway Environmental Services in Newburgh, ran a composting facility at Vassar College for eight years, producing about 10,000 cubic yards of topsoil a year from cafeteria and garden waste.

The facility was not supported by Vassar or grants, said Jackson, a member of the legislative task force on trash. Nonetheless, he said, "we turned a profit every year."

Using a one-cent sales tax to underwrite trash projects, Delaware opened a composting facility in 2006 that goes far beyond food waste. A huge drum called a bioreactor processes 33,400 tons of municipal solid waste a year — in addition to 2,300 tons of dairy industry byproduct and 9,900 tons of sewage sludge — from which non-degradable materials have been removed. A state report called the facility one of the most successful of 13 large-scale composting operations in the country.

More burning feared
