

Trucking trash to incinerator shows moratorium stupidity

For a city like many across the commonwealth that is lifting every rock to try to discover new viable streams of revenue, Mayor Mark Hawke's continued push for a trash-to-energy facility to be built in Gardner might hopefully bear fruit in the not-too-distant future.

While the state has blindly been locked into a moratorium on the building of such facilities for more than 10 years, it is beyond argument that technological advances since then should have blunted much of the paranoia stirred up by those opposed to building any more of them in the state.

Not offering strong support for the oft-spoken hysterical claims regarding health concerns associated with such plants, is that the moratorium only has prevented new facilities from being constructed.

Meaning those already built in the state are allowed to remain open.

One such facility, operated by Covanta Energy Corp. in Haverhill, first opened its doors in 1989.

In mid-2007, that facility was visited by city officials, among them Hawke's predecessor, Gerald St. Hilaire, when the consideration of such a plant first made its way onto the radar.

Since it opened, the Haverhill facility can offer up a large sample size of 21-plus years to garner plenty of scientific evidence that could point to an array of physical risks to those in the community. Instead, the company has been

proactive in properly disposing of mercury, continually working to reduce emissions while also producing energy courtesy of converting landfill gas and erecting a wind turbine for additional power generation.

ON FURTHER REVIEW



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Hardly adding up to a vision of a skull n' crossbones.

Instead of seeing any movement toward ending the moratorium in the last three-plus years since the Covanta visit, though, Hawke has been left searching for any sign of progress.

With some recent changeover in Gov. Deval Patrick's administration after the governor was re-elected, that prospect might finally have arrived.

Having largely come up empty handed when searching for a sympathetic ear on the state level in recent years on the issue, by having Richard Sullivan tabbed as the state's secretary of energy and environmental affairs, Hawke was hopeful that the moratorium's days could soon be numbered.

"With (Sullivan's predecessor) Secretary (Ian) Bowles, his atti-

tude was 'no,' and there was no going beyond that," said Hawke of previous efforts to end the moratorium. "But with Sullivan, he asked good questions and picked up an understanding (from the Friday meeting) that the technology has changed, so I wouldn't be surprised that if in one year there is movement on the moratorium."

That confidence was likely borne from previous experience with Sullivan as the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation commissioner, when he first worked with city officials to reopen the doors at the Heritage State Park Visitors Center, and then tried to keep them open. That building, which had been shuttered since 2002, was renovated last year and reopened for a few months during the city's 225th anniversary celebration, but as a result of unanticipated state budget cuts, the center was forced to close again in the fall.

In the Friday meeting, Sullivan met with Hawke and representatives of a New York company that specializes in trash-to-energy systems.

"The presentation explained that it isn't your grandfather's incinerator (technology wise) and the trash-to-energy plant has probably equal emissions of my truck," noted the mayor. "(This technology also offers) a great way to get rid of our refuse, and they also recycle, to where they open the bags, and actually end up turning 40 percent of that stuff to be recycled."

And unlike his truck, the dump

trucks that are currently tasked to shipping trash out of Gardner, as the city closed its landfill in December 2005, can't exactly be called "green," with high emissions and low gas mileage to boot.

While thinking that trekking the trash down Route 2 to the Fitchburg/Westminster landfill shouldn't be of too big a concern, Hawke noted, "Most of Gardner's trash is sent to an incinerator in Millbury. So it already goes to one now, and we want to have it come to us, where it would create jobs (about 40 in his estimation) and tax revenue."

Even though some environmental groups might have lauded state officials for extending the ban last year when it was then up for discussion — as James McCaffrey, director of the Sierra Club, an environmental advocacy group then said, "This is a major step forward to move the commonwealth towards a zero-waste policy" — thinking that by having Gardner's trash hauled to Millbury by inefficient and polluting vehicles, only to be incinerated in a facility with older technology, to go with not offering a better alternative down the road, somehow qualifies as a "major step forward," it's hard to fathom who has the best interests of Massachusetts residents at heart.

In contrast, if a facility were to be built in the city, it's hard to imagine that Gardner's residents and taxpayers wouldn't quickly benefit from either a significant curtailing of the current fees associated with the city's "pay as you

throw" program, or a complete elimination of them.

And while Massachusetts officials prefer to be stuck in neutral on this issue, other states and countries have chosen to be more proactive in the recent construction of trash-to-energy facilities.

Denmark, for example — a country that would be considered much more "green" than the U.S. — has proceeded to build 29 plants to serve 5.5 million of its people, to go with an additional 10 on the drawing board or that are being built. In contrast, across the U.S., there are only 87 plants serving more than 300 million people, with almost all of them built more than a decade ago. Considering that when those facilities were built, the concern about such plants spewing high levels of mercury or dioxin into the air was much more warranted, it would seem that with the advent of new technology, including the installation of new filters, that such plants would be seen as a much more environmentally friendly option to the typical standard bearer of a landfill.

Without the nearby option of a landfill the last five-plus years, the city has been left to lose on two ends, asking its residents to foot an additional bill for trash removal, then sending the trash elsewhere, where other communities benefit from collecting revenue that originated from the pockets of Gardner taxpayers, while also creating energy from that trash for their own residents.

While Hawke noted wanting to be at the front of the line if the

moratorium is lifted — stating "We are trying to address the concerns ahead of time, so we will be head of the curve when and if it does happen" — the mayor noted that the New York company is also currently in discussions with officials in Taunton about building a facility there. The mayor, though, cited wanting to keep his options open for which company could come to Gardner if the ban is lifted, citing having held discussions with Covanta and a German company, adding that "I could see Wheelabrator, (a wholly-owned subsidiary of) Waste Management that could be interested as well."

Until that can happen, though, Hawke is left to play a waiting game.

"Right now there are no possibilities at all because of the moratorium," said Hawke. "It isn't even a written moratorium, but a policy, as the administration doesn't want to permit more incinerators. I don't know why those people think that they know better than those who will live next to it. So, right now we are handcuffed."

With the meeting with Sullivan, though, Hawke voiced some confidence of some progress down the road, adding, "I think there is a realization from the secretary that he would bring it back (what he learned), do more homework, along with the realization that hauling this stuff out of state isn't the answer."

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