

Cities turn trash into heat, light

By Penny Wright
special writer

When the city of Detroit broke ground of a 3,300-ton-per-day waste-to-energy plant in May, it marked a turning point in the way local governments in Michigan have disposed of solid waste.

Communities had either burned or landfilled trash collected from residential, commercial and industrial customers.

Now Detroit and other municipalities are turning to an alternative—resource recovery. The method involves burning the waste and recovering the heat energy in the form of steam and electricity.

"There's a groundswell growing to build incinerators that burn all the burnables a community generates and produce steam and electricity in the process," said George Schutte, supervisor of the Oakland County DPW's solid waste unit.

OAKLAND COUNTY is finalizing engineering and financing plans for a proposed \$150-million waste-to-energy facility to serve some 200 county communities.

The plant is expected to be located at or near the County Service Center, where steam from the facility will heat the center's buildings. Present plans indicate the electricity generated by the plant will be sold to the local utility.

"The facility will be a guarantee for the future for the involved communities," said Schutte. "It's getting tougher to find suitable landfill sites, and even though energy costs are lower today, a waste-to-energy plant is still economically attractive."

Present projections confirm that steam and electricity sales will offset annual maintenance and operational costs of the facility.

"There has to be a fair amount of population to warrant this type of facility, and there has to be a market for the energy generated," Schutte added.

THE TECHNOLOGY of energy recovery incinerators is old. During the period 1899-1910, waste-to-energy plants were constructed and operated in Hamburg, Paris, Zurich, and New York. There are more than 368 facilities in operation worldwide.

Impetus for building the facilities in Michigan, particularly those handling municipal solid waste (some 25 industries are burning in-house wastes to produce energy), has come

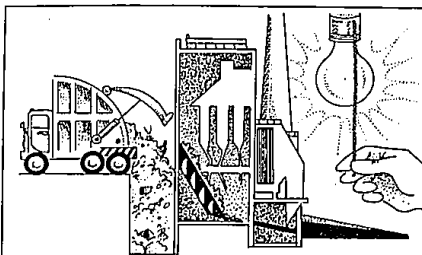
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from a state-sponsored Resource Recovery Strategy.

The strategy, adopted by the Natural Resources Commission in 1993, promotes recycling and incineration with energy recovery as major alternatives to land disposal of garbage.

CURRENTLY, 19 public projects are in various stages of planning and implementation.

Along with Detroit, Jackson County recently broke ground for a 200-ton-per-day plant. Kent County land

Muskegon County are expected to start construction of waste-to-energy facilities in the next year.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) forecasts 37 to 40 energy recovery incinerators will be built in the state over the next 20 years.

"Waste-to-energy projects have been slow getting off the ground, but I predict the concept will grow rapidly," said Fred Clinton, chief of the DNR's Resource Recovery Unit. DNR is the state's coordinating

agency for waste-to-energy projects.

HIGH CAPITAL and operational costs are a disadvantage of waste-to-energy plants. The estimated net costs for a 1,000-ton-per-day capacity plant operated six days per week is more than \$6 million annually.

"These facilities are not economical if the energy can't be sold," said Clinton. "Planners should look carefully at sizing the units so operating costs can be offset by sales of the energy and tipping fees."

Clinton indicated that the state's toughened air quality control standards have helped make incineration plants more acceptable to the public. "We've lightened air pollution control regulations. We're making people more comfortable about combustion emissions from these plants. Besides, these plants are easier to police for regulation infractions than landfills."

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