

Oakland cooling on Auburn Hills incinerator

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Auburn Hills is still likely to get a waste-to-energy incinerator under a major policy change approved by Oakland County Commissioners.

But not as soon as expected. Furthermore, the controversial incinerator will likely be smaller than anticipated.

Then again, it could be as large, or larger, than planned if the troubled incinerator in Madison Heights can't reopen.

Some commissioners say the incinerator may never be built. Others say that's wishful thinking.

Triggering the diverse speculation is a decision the Oakland County Board unanimously approved Thursday at its regular meeting.

The board voted 25-0 to divide the previously integrated solid waste program into two phases, each with a separate timetable.

The much-debated incinerator was put in a phase by itself. It will be

implemented as soon as possible, commissioners said.

But its earliest likely operational date is 1995.

OTHER COMPONENTS of the \$500 million solid waste plan — composting, recycling, landfilling and handling batteries and other hazardous household waste — are lumped in another phase to be implemented much sooner.

No schedule was presented. But officials say composting leaves, grass clippings and other yard waste could begin in the spring and the county could begin recycling in 1992.

Dividing the waste program into two phases was a practical matter, said Roy Rewold, chairman of the board of commissioners and one of the program's chief architects.

By separating into two phases, Oakland can proceed on one — recycling and composting — while the other is delayed because of permit requirements or problems related to getting support from individual communities.

Besides an air quality permit from state regulators, the incinerator needs approvals from about two-thirds of the 61 municipalities in Oakland County — in the form of inter-governmental agreements — before construction can begin.

Getting the air quality permit and IGAs is expected to take six to eight months, while construction will take almost three years.

"We didn't want to have to wait on the incinerator," explained Rewold, a Republican whose district (Oakland and Orion townships and part of Auburn Hills) is a hotbed of opposition to the incinerator.

Commissioner Nancy McConnell, R-Bloomfield Hills, said the agreement is a practical step. "Implementing half a program is better than implementing none."

IT'S STILL THE SAME program, said Commissioner Donn L. Wolf, R-Farmington Hills. "We've just divided it so we can do something, with one, while waiting on the other."

When the incinerator is built, Rewold said it will likely be "downsized," depending on a number of factors such as the success of recycling programs and technological developments.

Originally the incinerator was to be able to burn 2,000 tons of waste per day, with the heat generated converted into electricity to be sold to the Detroit Edison Co.

"There's no question in my mind that we'll need an incinerator," Rewold said, "it's just a matter of how big."

Other officials disagree, however, and say the incinerator may have to handle 2,000 tons per day, or more, if the waste-to-energy facility in Madison Heights continues to have problems and cannot be licensed.

That incinerator — which serves 14 communities as the major component of the Southeast Oakland County Resource and Recovery Authority — has been closed for two years because emissions did not meet state and federal standards.

SOCRRA officials plan to make nearly \$100 million worth of improvements. But even with that re-fitting, there remain unconfirmed reports it won't get the air quality permit needed to reopen.

SHOULD THAT happen, trash that might have been burned in Madison Heights could be incinerated in Auburn Hills.

"That's a possibility," admits Commissioner Mark W. Chester, R-10th District (parts of Troy and Madison Heights). "But it's probable the (Auburn Hills) incinerator will be downsized, if it's built at all."

Chester, an opponent of reopening the Madison Heights incinerator, said various companies claim to have — or to be close to having — technology that could recycle trash, thus eliminating the need for incinerators.

If that technology is reliable, Chester said neither the Auburn Hills nor the Madison Heights incinerators would be needed.

Commissioner Marilyn E. Goelz, R-Bloomfield Hills, agreed. "These may be viable alternatives," she said.

Other commissioners aren't as optimistic. They don't want incineration, but they don't see reliable alternatives.

Oakland will be a leader in the nation if it can recycle 50 percent of its trash, notes Commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield. "No other community in the country has reached that goal."

"But what do we do with the other 50 percent? With today's technology, we can either burn it or bury it."

On a practical note, however, delaying the incinerator may silence a number of critics who say incineration should be done on a very small scale, only after alternatives have been exhausted.

Among those critics is Rochester Hills Mayor Billie Ireland who has implied her city would file suit if necessary, to block the incinerator in neighboring Auburn Hills.

'Polluters pay' okayed, sent to House for review

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The "polluters pay" toxic cleanup bill is now three bills, and this week it was back in the state House of Representatives for final passage.

Area senators except Richard Fessler, R-Commerce, gave the package overwhelming support as it cleared the upper chamber last Thursday. Fessler, a lame duck who didn't seek re-election, had an excused absence.

"We divided the bill by agreement," said Sen. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids. That allowed him to put in his name as sponsor of Senate Bill 1020 and leave Rep. Tom Alley, D-West Branch, as sponsor of House Bill 5878, containing the remainder of the enforcement procedures.

Those two bills passed with dissenting votes from four outstate Republican senators.

IN ADDITION, the Senate passed Ehlers' SB 981, setting up a Michigan Environmental Assurance Corp. It will finance "orphan

shares" — portions of the cost of cleanups when not all the responsible parties can be found. The bill went to the House on Oct. 1.

The vote was 27-6. One nay vote came from Senate Finance Committee chair Norm Shinkle, R-Monroe, who objected: "It is going to be a fee or tax increase. We have no idea what it's going to be." Shinkle also complained that senators bypassed the committee process.

Sen. Lana Pollack, D-Arbor, who sponsored the original "polluters pay" measure — Senate Bill 375 that failed in June — congratulated Alley's House committee on its work and said it reflected her SB 375.

But Rep. Ken Sikema, R-Grand Rapids, called it "an outrage" to suggest the House bill mirrored Pollack's efforts. "There are some people in the state who can't resist squeezing the last ounce of partisan blood out of this issue," he told reporters. "I'm getting sick and tired of it."

Gov. James Blanchard called it "landmark" legislation, indicating he will sign it.

THE "POLLUTERS PAY" bills are designed to speed the cleanup of toxic sites while saving taxpayers billions of dollars. Key parts include:

- Giving the state Department of Natural Resources more access to public and private property and documents, the power to order cleanups of contaminated sites, and the power to levy fines.

- Creating a new Office of Environmental Cleanup Facilitation, to mediate disputes between the DNR and site owners. A panel of seven scientists would settle disputes.

- Defining shared cost responsibility if several parties are to blame for pollution at a site.

- Permitting private individuals to file lawsuits in an attempt to force cleanups.

- Providing a plan to allow the reuse or redevelopment of a former industrial site without having to assume the cost of a cleanup.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Tax base sharing derailed

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Rep. William Keith will try this week to get his bills permitting business tax base sharing among schools on track after they were derailed suddenly last week.

The black caucus and Democrats from the Saginaw-Flint belt fell short in an effort to send Keith's bills to the Appropriations Committee. But their 41 votes showed enough strength to scare the nine-term veteran who chairs the Education Committee. The bills were temporarily set aside.

"We're working desperately to reduce the inequities between school districts," said Keith, D-Garden City. He told the House that sharing business tax growth countywide would help close the gap between local districts which spend \$2,500 to \$8,000 per pupil.

THE STICKING point, however, wasn't tax base sharing but how Keith proposed to soften the blow for areas which would surrender their commercial and industrial growth with poor districts.

Keith would reimburse the growth areas out of the \$72 million which the state "recaptures" by withholding their categorical aid for transportation and pensions.

"We're talking about \$72 million!" said Rep. Joe Young Jr., D-Detroit, who didn't want to give back part of the recapture money.

"It comes out of the school aid fund," said Rep. Ted Wallace, D-Detroit.

And one of Keith's usual allies, Rep. James O'Neill, D-Saginaw, said, "(Growth) districts could gain more by tax sharing than they would lose through recapture."

IN THE KEY roll call, 41 voted to send Keith's bills to the Appropriations Committee, and 58 were opposed.

Voting yes were Lyn Banks, R-Livonia; John Bennett, D-Redford; Maxine Berman, D-Southfield; Gerald Law, R-Plymouth; and Wilfred Webb, D-Hazel Park — along with all members of the black caucus, House Speaker Lewis Dodak, O'Neill, Democratic floor leader Pat Gagliardi and Appropriations Chair Dominic Jacobetti.

Voting no were Keith, Justine Barnes, D-Westland; Jan Dolan, R-Farmington Hills; Mat Denaskis, R-Lake Orion; David Hoenigman, R-

West Bloomfield; James Kosteva, D-Canton; Judith Miller, R-Birmingham; and Gordon Sparks, R-Troy.

Kosteva said the Keith bills shouldn't go to appropriations because they're "not appropriations bills." It's unknown how much state money will be needed to reimburse the growth districts, he said, because it's unknown how many counties will volunteer for the tax base sharing plan.

Keith said intermediate school districts expressing an interest include Kent (Grand Rapids), Midland, Ingham (Lansing), Jackson and Eaton.

UNDER HOUSE Bills 5885 and 5886:

- Growth in commercial and industrial property tax base could be shared countywide if every district agrees. One district could kill the plan at any time.

- Existing commercial and industrial property would be unaffected. The sharing plan could not apply to residential, farming or mining property.

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