

Oakland may relinquish solid waste plan

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Oakland County is getting ready to wash its hands of solid waste.

If voters do not approve the ballot issue likely to go before them later this year, the county will discontinue efforts to develop a solid waste plan, according to Commissioner Roy Rewold.

"We (county commissioners) will be finished with it, and we'll turn it over to local communities," Rewold said following Thursday's informational meeting for county commissioners.

At that meeting, Rewold, chairman of the board and one of the chief architects of the solid waste plan, surprised some of his colleagues — and pleased some critics — by reversing his earlier position.

Rewold said he wants to put the question of bonding the \$500 million solid waste plan — the most ambi-

tious in county history — to a vote of the people.

Last summer, at Rewold's insistence, commissioners narrowly voted against putting the issue on the ballot, fearing it would be defeated.

"Last year we didn't have all our contracts," Rewold said. "I was against putting it to a vote because all the pieces weren't in place, and people really wouldn't know what they were voting on."

"That's all changed now," said the Oakland Township Republican. "We have all our contracts and there are no hidden agendas. Now's the time."

WITH EVERYTHING known, Rewold said voters can make an intelligent decision . . . and county officials can walk away from the problem if the ballot proposal is defeated.

"We (commissioners) have already done more than we were obligated to," he said. "If it's rejected, we can

turn it (solid waste) over to local communities."

Oakland has contracts for a waste-to-energy incinerator in Auburn Hills, about \$191 million; a recycling facility, also in Auburn Hills, costing about \$16 million; a landfill operation, the Eagle Valley Landfill in Orion Township, \$50 million; and one or more competing facilities, operated by private contractors and financed with tipping fees.

Rewold calls it a "complete" waste system, one he insists will not be successful if any of the components — like the incinerator — are cut out, as advocated by opponents.

"I'm going to recommend the entire system," said Rewold. "It's an all or nothing situation."

While some of his colleagues may disagree with Rewold, Commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield, strongly agrees.

The solid waste program can't op-

erate effectively without the incinerator, Pernick said. "There's no sense building a system that will only last a few years."

OAKLAND'S PLAN calls for recycling up to 50 percent of the almost 400 tons of refuse generated daily and incinerating or landfilling the rest.

If incineration is included, the Oakland plan would meet the county's needs well into the next century, according to planners.

Without the incinerator, trash that would have been burned would likely be landfilled instead, thus shortening its effective lifespan to less than a decade.

"With the incinerator, we have a program that will operate effectively through 2010," said Pernick. "Without the incinerator, we'll be facing the same problem in a few years."

But any waste plan that includes

an incinerator is a dead duck, according to Marilynne Burton-Ristau, head of RAIL (Residents Against Incineration and Landfill).

RAIL is one of the most vocal opponents of the incinerator. Burton-Ristau flatly predicts that any ballot issue that includes incineration will be voted down.

If the county eliminates the incinerator, Burton-Ristau predicts the ballot issue will be approved. "People want recycling," she said. "They don't want the incinerator."

Among those who favors eliminating the incinerator from the solid waste program is Commissioner Donald F. Bishop, R-Rochester Hills. "I really wasn't surprised" by Rewold's switch, he said. "We were at an impasse and had to do something. I favor putting the issue on the ballot, but I think we should separate it," giving voters a chance to say if they want an incinerator or not.

Commissioner Donn L. Wolf, R-Farmington Hills, said he is pleased with the decision to consult voters, even if it means going for broke.

"I've always favored a vote of the

people," he said. "We've got a big education job ahead of us."

NO VOTE WAS taken at Thursday's meeting, although commissioners seemed to generally agree with Rewold's resolution to put the issue to a vote.

His resolution will be discussed in committee and eventually considered by the full board of commissioners, probably next month.

It will take a special election to put the solid waste program or any other issue before the voters at a cost of nearly \$225,000, according to Jan Stickle, county director of elections.

That's because there are no other countywide or statewide elections scheduled for the rest of the year, she said. "There are some local elections in August and November, but nothing countywide."

Stickle said she hasn't been contacted by commissioners, but a request for a special election would be reviewed by the Election Scheduling Committee which would give at least 45 days notice.

... more questions than answers

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Oakland's decision to put its solid waste program to a vote prompted a variety of reactions from communities involved.

Most officials contacted by The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Friday had not been fully informed about a proposal from county commissioners to put the controversial program on the ballot.

Thus, they had more questions than answers.

That proposal was offered late Thursday afternoon during an unscheduled information meeting of Oakland county commissioners.

Two protesters who were critical of the way commissioners have handled the waste program — more specifically, the incinerator proposed for Auburn Hills — were escorted out of the meeting.

Details on what the ballot issue will say and what it will include have yet to be worked out. Furthermore the issue itself — as well as the decision to put it to a special countywide vote — will be reviewed in committee and voted on by the full board of commissioners.

But here's a sampling of reactions

to the news that county officials will likely put the solid waste issue to a vote of the people:

• Auburn Hills. "That's a good idea," said City Manager Leonard Hendricks. "That way voters will get to decide one way or another. But I think it could pass (complete with incinerator) if it's presented properly."

"I think people are ready to address the solid waste issue," Hendricks said.

Although the Auburn Hills mayor and individual city councilmen have voiced concerns about the incinerator, Hendricks emphasized that his municipality has not reversed its original position in favor of an incinerator.

"They (the mayor and critical councilmen) are very concerned about a safe and properly run incinerator," Hendricks said.

Unless the city council takes action to the contrary, Hendricks said the contract with Oakland County — specifying Auburn Hills as the site of the incinerator — remains in effect.

• Farmington. "I don't think the county will be able to walk away from the problem of solid waste," said Robert F. Deadman, city manager of Farmington.

He was referring to statements

from County Commissioner Roy Rewold, chairman of the county board, that Oakland County would discontinue its efforts to deal with solid waste if voters reject the ballot proposal.

If voters reject the proposal — and, as Rewold said, kill the program — the solid waste problem will still exist, said Deadman. "Individual communities as well as the county will still have responsibility."

Besides being city manager of Farmington, Deadman is chairman of the Resource Recovery & Recycling Authority of Southwestern Oakland County that includes Farmington, Farmington Hills and Southfield.

• Farmington Hills. Voter approval might persuade individual communities to support the solid waste program, said Thomas P. Bishop, director of public services for Farmington Hills.

If voters in Farmington Hills, for

example, approved the solid waste program officials might look more favorably on the intergovernmental agreement.

Those agreements commit a city's trash to the county plan. Only 12 out of 60 communities have signed the agreements so far, one of the reasons the waste program has stalled.

• Southeastern Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority, including Birmingham, Troy, Royal Oak and 11 other communities.

Michael A. Czuprenski, the recovery authority operations director, said his consortium is going ahead with its own plans for solid waste, including recycling and reopening its waste-to-energy incinerator in Madison Heights.

Putting the county's solid waste plan on the ballot won't effect recovery authority communities, Czuprenski said. "The county's (tipping fees) are simply too high for us. We'll handle our own waste."

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