

Both sides of incinerator issue rely on science

On Nov. 5, Oakland County voters will decide on a ballot proposal to finance the county's proposed solid waste program. This is the start of a continuing series on the solid waste program and the controversy it has generated.

By Pat Murphy
Staff writer

Proponents of Oakland County's proposed solid waste plan call it the most advanced in the world — an integrated program that supplements recycling with incineration and an ash landfill. Homeowners and businesses will be required to separate their trash. Reusable material will be recycled. Trash that can't be recycled will be burned in an Auburn Hills incinerator, with the ash buried in a county-controlled landfill in Orion Township.

Opponents — including West Bloomfield attorney Michael A. Schwartz — call it a "White Elephant," an expensive, complicated system that will never work.

"It's a quick fix," said Schwartz, who is also chairman of the Oakland Environmental Protection Council. "It's never worked anywhere else and it won't work here."

But there's worse news, insist Schwartz and others. They insist the incinerator will cause serious health and environmental problems.

"It's going to emit heavy metals and toxic gases," said Schwartz. Both sides have technical experts to support their assessments. Oakland County, for example, has health risk assessments prepared by nationally known consultants and submitted for review to the Air Quality Division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

THE HEALTH ASSESSMENT is in volumes, said Ann Hobart, a former county commissioner who is now the public information spokeswoman for the county's solid waste management division. "But it concludes that in a worst case scenario, emissions from the incinerator could POSSIBLY result in one additional

incident of cancer in 70 years. But that's only if the person breathes the air and eats food grown in the vicinity of the incinerator."

The DNR apparently agrees with that assessment, or one close to it. In a Sept. 11 press release, the DNR said it is prepared to approve an operating permit for the incinerator. "Our approval will be in a staff report made to the Air Pollution Control Commission (which issues incineration permits)," said Dennis Armstrong, a supervisor in the Air Quality Division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

While that staff report is forthcoming (within the next two weeks), the DNR has tentatively approved Oakland's operating permit. Arm-

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bruster said.

Experts opposed to incinerators state their case in more direct — and understandable — terms.

"Any science that says incinerators are safe is bad science," insists Paul Connett, an associate professor of chemistry at St. Lawrence University in New York who has traveled the world crusading against incineration.

Connett has participated in numerous international symposiums dealing with incinerator emissions and his message is clear. "Don't put your faith in incinerators. They don't work and they cause health problems."

LANDFILLS ARE slightly more preferable to incinerators, Connett said. But the real answer to solid waste is recycling. "Recycle and then recycle some more," he told an Oakland County audience in October 1990. "And then recycle again."

Connett was asked why other sci-

entists do not seem as vocal — or negative — in their assessments of incineration. There is not, for example, a group of noted scientists speaking out on incineration as they did — with physicist Carl Sagan in the forefront — against nuclear proliferation.

"That's a good question," said Connett, who believes the threat from incineration is life threatening.

The answer has to do with the fact that chemists and other scientists who would be expected to oppose incineration are not focused, not mobilized — not yet anyway.

Company to inform about incinerators

By Pat Murphy
Staff writer

Westinghouse Electric Corp., the Pittsburgh-based company that has a contract to build the controversial incinerator in Auburn Hills — is preparing for an information program aimed at Oakland voters.

"We just want to make sure people have accurate and objective information about the incinerator," said Vaughn Gilbert, Westinghouse manager of public relations.

Westinghouse has filed a statement of organization for independent, political ballot questions with county officials. Such a statement is required under Michigan campaign finance laws from any organization that intends to spend \$500 or more to influence voters.

THE STATEMENT says the company is forming "The Committee for Responsible Solid Waste Management" to support the solid waste bond proposal on the Nov. 5 ballot. Gilbert, who is visiting Oakland County periodically and operating out of the Westinghouse sales offices in Southfield, said the committee

will have several mailings designed to inform voters about the safety of the company's incinerators.

"We will also provide information to organizations," said Gilbert. "We want voters to have as much objective information as possible."

While his company is the only party listed on the organizational statement, Gilbert said he expects other groups and companies to join in the informational effort. "We'll have more information in the near future."

AT LEAST one community downtown of the proposed incinerator already has a newsletter — also designed to inform voters.

The Rochester City Council last week issued the first edition of "Oakland Tomorrow," billing it as "A newsletter addressing Oakland County's solid waste management issues."

Rochester — as well as Oakland County and other communities — can not spend tax money to advocate a position on an upcoming election. But this newsletter seems to come close to promoting a negative reaction among voters.

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