Cities skeptical of incinerator alternative

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Can trash from Birmingham or Troy be converted to synthetic coal?

A Lansing area company says yes and is willing to invest $45 million to prove it.

But members of the Southeast Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority said they are are skeptical of a proposal to scrap plans for a $50 million incinerator in favor of a privately-funded alternative.

SOCRRA would be far more receptive, said Troy City Manager Frank Gerstenecker, if the technology involved had been tested and proven.

"It's a big risk" for a small group of communities like this, said Gerstenecker, referring to the 14 communities that make up SOCRRA — Berkley, Beverly Hills, Birmingham, Clawson, Hazel Park, Ferndale, Huntington Woods, Lathrup Village, Madison Heights, Oak Park, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak, Royal Oak Township and Troy..

"I would like it (the proposal) much more if a plant like it was up and running somewhere," said James Perry, a SOCRRA member from Royal Oak.

"I would feel a lot better if Detroit Edison was involved," said Teri Arbenowske, assistant to the manager of Beverly Hills.

GERSTENECKER, PERRY and Arbenowske commented last week after representatives of Entropic Technologies Corp. said they could save tax money and build something better than an incinerator.

SOCRRA took no action on the proposal. But its members agreed to closely examine Entropic's proposal and the technology that made it possible.

That technology has been developed over the last four years at a cost of about $5 million, including $2 million in grants from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Commerce, said Noel F. Mermer, chief consulting engineer for the East Lansing based company.

> *'It's a big risk for a small group of communities like this.'*
> — *Frank Gerstenecker, Troy city manager*

"We know it works," said Mermer. "We take all the risks."

SOCRRA plans to build a $50 million incinerator to replace the one that was closed last year after more than three decades of burning trash, because emissions did not meet clean air standards.

Entropic suggests SOCCRA forget about the incinerator and turn the problem of trash over to its new technology.

THE COMPANY does not have a plan in operation, said Mermer. But officials have tested the component parts and are confident they will work when put together.

The proposal would involve no tax money, said Mermer.

"All we want from you (SOCRRA) is a steady stream of trash" that can be converted to synthetic coal, called syncoal, and assistance finding a 20-acre site, he said.

SOCRRA would pay a tipping fee of $55 per ton, a price Mermer admitted is considerably higher than current tipping fees at private landfills.

But as local landfills fill up, tipping fees are expected to increase dramatically as they have in other areas where the price is linked to the availability of land for dumping.

Per ton tipping fees are nearly $150 in New Jersey and about $10 in Idaho, according to SOCRRA statistics.

Syncoal is an efficient, low-sulfur coal substitute that can be sold to auto manufacturers or other high volume users, Mermer said.

HIS COMPANY had been negotiating with Detroit Edison, he said.

"But the company has delayed any decision to buy it (syncoal) at this time," he said. "I'm personally disappointed. But I'm sure we can sell syncoal to other companies," he said.

If, for some reason, his company could not find a buyer for the syncoal, it would not be able to build the facility, Mermer said.

Thomas G. Waffen, general manager of SOCRRA, said he too would like to find an alternative to building the incinerator.

"But we're on a tight schedule," he said. "We don't have much flexibility. But we'll take a look at this proposal."

. . . incinerator laws challenged

AP — Two Michigan laws relaxing rules for handling incinerator ash will be challenged in court, an environmental group said.

Anne Woiwode, director of the Mackinac chapter of the Sierra Club, said a suit seeking to overturn the state laws will be filed in U.S. District Court in either Lansing or Grand Rapids within the next week.

"Our goal is not to put incinerators out of business. Our goal is to protect the environment of Michigan," she said.

The suit would potentially affect operations at the Central Wayne Sanitation Authority incinerator in Dearborn Heights, as well as others throughout the state.

Currently the incinerator used by a number of communities in Oakland County is being remodeled. (See related story, above).

ASH FROM incinerators has been found to be hazardous waste but incinerator operators have maintained that disposing of ash in the same manner as hazardous waste would be too costly, Woiwode said.

Pressure from incinerator operators led lawmakers to approve two measures earlier this year that relax the standards for transporting and storing the ash.

But Woiwode said those laws violate the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act which prohibits any state from enacting standards less stringent than those in the federal law. The state laws have 21 provisions that are weaker than the federal law, she said.

"We depend in this country on ensuring that a common bottom line exists in the regulation of pollution, and that bottom line is set by federal law. The state of Michigan has wantonly defied the federal government's bottom line on hazardous waste regulation," she said.

Other states have adopted regulations that are weaker than the federal law, but none except Michigan has passed a law that included weaker provisions, Woiwode said.

THE SUIT is expected to name Gov. James Blanchard, who signed the measures, Attorney General Frank Kelley and Natural Resources director David Hales as defendants.

Frederick Dilley, a Grand Rapids attorney representing the Sierra Club, said a decision has yet to be made on whether to seek a court order blocking the laws while the suit is in progress.

Kelley spokesman Chris DeWitt and Sue Henry, spokeswoman for the Department of Natural Resources, said they cannot comment on pending litigation.

In addition to the local incinerator, others currently operating in Michigan include those the Detroit, Grosse Pointe-Clinton, Jackson County and Kent County incinerators.

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