

Westinghouse, incinerator foes point to York, Pa.

On Nov. 5, Oakland voters will decide a ballot proposal to finance the county's proposed \$500 million solid waste program, the most expensive in history. This is part of a continuing series about the solid waste program and the controversy it has generated.

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

When officials for the Westinghouse Electric Corp. talk about the efficiency of the incinerator they hope to build in Auburn Hills, they often point to York County, Pennsylvania, a rural-suburban community east of Harrisburg.

The company's waste-to-energy facility in that community has been operating for two years, with better than 93 percent efficiency. "That's the same kind of facility we'd like to build here," says Vaughn Gilbert, the company's manager of environmental services and public relations.

But opponents of incineration point to York, too — for different reasons. They see the facility as a

perfect example of incineration run amok. Worse yet, they insist, it shows how the manufacturers and state officials, forget the promises they once made so faithfully.

"Our eyes burn and the odor is terrible," said Beatrice A. Whitekamp, a former elementary teacher who lives within two miles of the York incinerator. She's also a spokesman for ROBBI (Residents Opposed to the Black Bridge Incinerator). Black Bridge is a reference to the road on which the York incinerator is located.

WHETHER THE York facility is a model of efficiency — or an unhealthy, dioxin-spewing public nuisance — seems to boil down to a question similar to the one encountered this week by U.S. senators voting on the confirmation of Clarence Thomas: Who do you believe?

Besides Westinghouse officials, a number of presumably knowledgeable — and objective — people insist the York facility is indeed the answer to the area's municipal waste problem.

The community had a crisis with landfills — including four on the En-



vironmental Protection Agency's so-called Superfund list of the nation's most polluted sites, according to Charles E. Strehl.

"The incinerator seems to provide an answer," said Strehl, public works director in the City of York, the largest of 72 municipalities in the county with about 45,000 residents. "It's reliable and doesn't seem to cause any problems."

Kenneth Marshall, environmental writer for The Patriot-News newspapers in nearby Harrisburg, agrees. "As far as I know, the York incinerator is functioning well and people are satisfied with it," he said.

Whitekamp, however, says those who like the incinerator don't see what she and her immediate neighbors see. "There are times when black smoke pours out of that stack," she said. "When you drive along Route 30, you can see the haze. They (officials) insist it's steam, but it's very dark." Whitekamp said. "And sometimes it's noisy... and the odors are so bad we stay inside."

THE COMPANY and state environmental officials made numerous promises before the incinerator went on line in October 1989, said Whitekamp. "But now, they don't even answer the hotline. They've got a recording."

Auburn Hills City Manager Leonard Hendricks and Mayor Robert Grunick visited the York facility in May 1990 to see the incinerator for themselves.

"We knocked on doors and talked with a lot of people," said Hendricks. "There was a slight difference of

opinion, with a few people complaining about noise," he said. "But they didn't seem to have much credibility with their neighbors. Most people don't seem to have serious problems."

Glen Schoonfield, the Auburn Hills assistant city manager, and several city council members went to York several weeks later. "There was an odor problem close up, but a short distance away there didn't seem to be any. Otherwise we didn't hear many complaints."

The Auburn Hills City Council has voiced loud and numerous concerns about the county's proposed incinerator, Schoonfield acknowledged. "But we're not necessarily opposed to it. We just want to make sure any facility built here is the best and safest."

A SPOKESMAN for the York incinerator acknowledges the facility has had 235 complaints in the first seven months of 1991. "And each one

was taken very seriously," said Ellen C. O'Connor, community service manager.

But 223 of those complaints came from two people, she said, both of whom are active in ROBBI.

"We investigated one call from a homeowner who complained about ash on a leaf," O'Connor said. "It turned out to be mildew... totally safe and totally unrelated to the incinerator."

Another caller complained about eye irritation, O'Connor said. "The cause was determined to be pollen."

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources insists it is faithfully monitoring emissions from the York incinerator.

Because of electronic monitoring at the smokestack, "We know what comes out as soon as the plant does. This is the most closely watched incinerator in the country," said a PDER spokesman. "And I assure you, those emissions are 99.9 percent clean."

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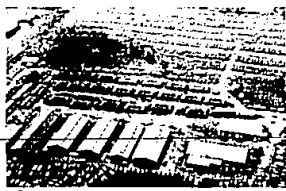
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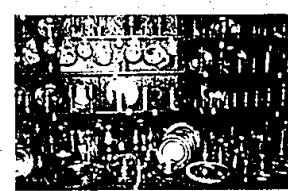
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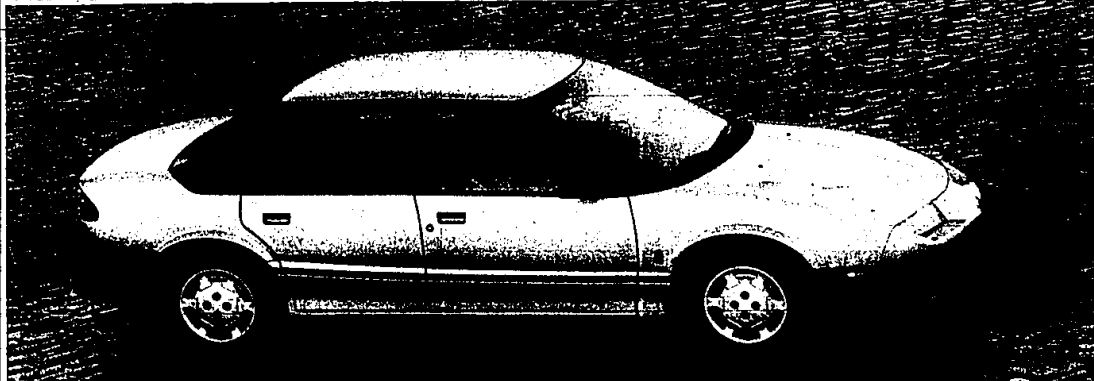
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