

Toxic Ash Threatens MetroPark, a.k.a “We told you so”

by Ed McArdle

A couple of years ago I led a Sierra Club outing to Oakwoods Metropark. We followed the outermost trail through the beautiful huge trees that border the Huron River and loop towards the southern boundary of the park. There they were. Visible through the trees were huge mounds. As we bushwhacked a short distance from the trail we could see that these were not ancient

Native American burial mounds but large mountains of incinerator ash. Since then the mounds have gotten larger, and now the Central Wayne Sanitation Authority, which consists of the cities of Westland, Dearborn Heights, Garden City, Inkster and Wayne, plans to expand the landfill to an elevation of 100 feet, equivalent to the height of a ten-

story building. The five cities have already agreed to take initial steps to issue bonds that could cost up to \$6 million without any public hearing.

It was obvious to environmentalists watchdogging the Central Wayne incinerator (Ecology Center, Sierra Club, Clean Water Action, and local groups) that the mid-1990s expansion of the incinerator

would also force expansion of the ash landfill. We just didn't think it would happen so fast. Up until last spring the authority believed that there was approximately 7-12 years of capacity left. But after years of moving old ash around (under a consent order to install liners in the three cells that have been receiving ash since 1966) they discovered old ash that they didn't know was there. So the panic button was



Central Wayne Incinerator-Ash Landfill

Photo supplied by Ed McArdle

pushed and now they realize the site will fill to capacity shortly. Despite the financial instability of the five cities and their private partner Constellation Energy, the Authority wants to use the bond money to build a fourth cell this spring and expand upward or else the ash will have to go to a more expensive location such as the Carleton Farms landfill in Sumpter Township.

One of the expected ironies (at least for us) is that since the startup in 1999 of the expanded Central Wayne incinerator most of the waste burned is from outside the five member cities with even some from out of state. For every ton of waste burned, you get at least 400 pounds of a highly concentrated mix of fly ash and

bottom ash that contains toxic metals such as lead, cadmium and mercury along with numerous organic compounds including dioxins and PCB's. If the incinerator can burn at 85% capacity it will create over 60,000 tons of this toxic ash per year. With the newer pollution controls on the stack, it stands to reason

that the ash would now be even more toxic. Not only that, but because incinerator ash consists of small particles it has far more potential to create toxic leachate than regular garbage. Think of your morning coffee – if you poured water over the whole bean you wouldn't get much coffee leachate. This is why Michigan passed a law in 1989 to keep incinerator ash in

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Traditionally, designers of economic processes tried to increase profits and reduce costs. The easiest way to do that was to “externalize” waste as pollution. But as “away” gets closer to home, that becomes less acceptable. Change the game, say McDonough and Braungart, by changing the objectives; don’t seek only to profit financially. Ask yourself, “How can we love all the children, of all species, for all time?”

That’s a little woo-woo, perhaps (and happily, there’s very little of that in this book), but it sums up the paradigm shift proposed by *Cradle to Cradle*. Impressively, that shift is being implemented in material ways in decidedly non-woo-woo companies such as Herman Miller, Steelcase, Ford, and Nike.

McDonough and Braungart

are careful not to be too glib about technical cure-alls, noting that the sort of change they propose is going to be incremental, spurred on by individual commitments to environmentally sound living. Consumers increasingly recognize that the dollars they spend support a whole system, and that they can choose between organic food and factory farms, coal burning plants and wind generation, fair trade and exploited Third World workers. Today, we can learn a lot about the companies behind the items we purchase, and once we know, it’s hard not to make conscious — and conscientious — choices. Companies are starting to grasp this, and *Cradle to Cradle* is one blueprint for how they, and the rest of us, can profit from that consciousness.

Cradle to Cradle builds on the work of Amory Lovins, who pointed out during the 1970s that people want services like cold beer and hot showers, not raw energy like barrels of oil. Lovins launched an entirely new way of addressing the ongoing energy debate. McDonough and Braungart offer a similar perspective shift. Conversely, their book may lead you to stop recycling your SoBe bottles and start buying virgin printer paper — but it might also drop sustainability issues right onto the CEO’s desk, which is precisely where they need to be.

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separate, and of course more costly, monofills such as the Central Wayne ash landfill.

According to a 1990 Heritage News article, the landfill is actually the site of the old Huron Quarry located in Huron Twp. It was acquired in partnership with the Huron Clinton Metroparks in the 1960’s under the Michigan Open Space Act in the expectation that the quarry/landfill would be capped and returned to the park. However, the park which borders the landfill on three sides donated

the land to the incinerator in 1988 for fear of liability problems. The fear was well justified. Over the years there have been numerous violations involving consent orders and court judgments covering illegal discharges, operations and spills. The latest, in 2001, involved improper cover on the landfill cells and ash track out from the trucks. Because the landfill is 40 feet deep, well below the water table, it requires continuous pumping. Their water permit allows the landfill to discharge treated leachate directly

into the Huron River less than three miles upstream from a popular fishing spot in a Flat Rock city park. It’s hard to imagine a more inappropriate site than this. Let’s demand a public hearing and stop this expansion. A strong coalition of environmentalists and outdoor lovers, including citizens from the five incinerator cities, could do it.

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