



Landfills in the Sky: The Last Years of Michigan Incineration?

By Dave Dempsey

photo: Gail Slaughter

It all began with the bang of a landfill crisis in the early 1980s. It will probably end with the whimper of an incinerator shutdown sometime in the next few years.

The “it” – Michigan’s 25-year flirtation with incineration as a means of solid waste disposal – has cost hundreds of millions more in taxpayer dollars than originally expected, stirred public indignation over the spewing of mercury, cadmium, dioxins and other toxic substances into air and water, and contributed little to solving the state’s waste problems.

But while it went on, it sure caused a lot of trouble – to the respiratory health of Michigan citizens, to municipal officials struggling with enormous incinerator price tags, and ultimately to public confidence in government. Today, only four solid waste incinerators remain. One is shut down and the future of the other three is in doubt.

Born as an answer to the discovery of hundreds of leaking dumps around Michigan, official promotion of incinerators as a magic bullet to solve the state’s waste problems seems incomprehensible today. But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it made sense to many in government.

Arguing for completion of the controversial Detroit incinerator in 1986, Bella Marshall, the chair of the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery

Authority, told the *Detroit Free Press* that “Detroit, Wayne County, and all of Michigan face a fast-approaching crisis in finding available landfills in which to dispose of garbage.”

Marshall referred to the increasing difficulty of finding geologically suitable sites for landfills that would inhibit groundwater contamination as well as public restiveness over proposed new sites. Community after community across the state resisted the siting of new dumps, fearing fouled drinking water and cancer risks. A citizen advisory committee to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources in 1983 called for a moratorium on all new landfills until the state could assure the safety of their design.

Instead of a moratorium, the DNR later the same year issued a “resource recovery strategy” that called for \$300 million in state-backed bonds to support recycling programs, composting – and up to 40 new trash incinerators across the state. Although the proposed bond faltered for fiscal reasons, emboldened local officials pursued the construction of incinerators not only in Detroit, but also in Jackson and Grand Rapids, and the retrofitting of an incinerator in Dearborn Heights.

Like most, they had forgotten the divisive history of burning garbage. The Detroit Common Council in 1889 gave a three-year contract to the Detroit Sanitary Works to col-

lect and dispose of the city’s garbage for \$35,000 a year. Located on the Detroit River, the burner caused “continuously vile, sickening, offensive and nauseating odors, and also obnoxious, stifling and insoluble gases and vapors of a character so offensive as to be indescribable,” reported the *Detroit Sun*. In September 1891 a federal judge decided the plant was a public nuisance and shut it down.

The modern history of garbage burning in Michigan would turn out to be no less of a nuisance.

Economic Problems Plague Michigan Burners

Incinerators have generated fierce public opposition in recent decades for a variety of reasons – including repulsive odors, emissions of bioaccumulative toxic substances like mercury and dioxins, and the disposal of toxic ash in landfills. But one of the most forceful arguments against the state’s burners is that they have proven prohibitively expensive for cash-strapped local governments. The enormous capital and operating costs of incinerators dwarf the investment required to recycle or even to bury trash – particularly since state laws designed to end the “landfill crisis” in the 1980s resulted in a sudden surge in the number of dumps, driving disposal prices for those facilities down. Detroit’s incinerator “disposes” of waste at an estimated

average cost of \$130 per ton, far above the state's per-ton landfill tipping fee of slightly more than \$24 per ton. The 3600-ton-per-day capacity of the facility is believed to make it the largest of its kind in the world, but the Detroit burner has rarely achieved half of that waste flow.

Two of the three other municipal solid waste incinerators still operating are similarly expensive.

"The incinerator has been a financial burden on Jackson County and each of its residents since its inception," the citizens group Recycling Jackson reported in its newsletter. Despite a \$2 million state grant to pay for improved air pollution equipment, "The original estimated construction cost of \$15 million soared to \$23 million before it was completed. This debt will not be retired until 2013."

The group pointed out that Jackson County's disposal "tipping fee" is almost \$90 per ton. Tipping fees in next-door Washtenaw County have been as low as \$14 per ton. Jackson's fees are expected to keep rising by several dollars per year. And a county ordinance prohibits trash haulers from using less expensive landfills elsewhere.

Travis Fojtasek, president of Recycling Jackson, says county officials have shown little interest in the program his 20-year-old nonprofit organization operates. In 2000, Recycling Jackson collected about 1 million

pounds of residential waste, but that was less than one percent of the waste generated in the county.

"We think [the county's lack of interest in recycling] is because the county owns the incinerator and views recycling as 'competition' for the trash



The Jackson County Incinerator's negative economics appear about to worsen.

they burn," Fojtasek says.

The *Jackson Citizen-Patriot* seemed to agree in a February editorial. When Fojtasek wrote county commissioners to urge them to reconsider incineration by supporting increased recycling, a county commissioner appeared to threaten the group's small county environmental education grant, saying, "They have their hand out, and they're stabbing you in the back."

Said the *Citizen-Patriot*: "So what is the county's attitude here? If you want money, don't dare question or criticize us? We hope not. For when the county eventually pays off the incinerator, it will face a huge issue: Continue to operate the costly facility or go back to landfilling? There could be an expanded role for recycling in either scenario."

The facility's negative economics appear about to worsen. An existing debt of more than \$1.2 million resulting from lower-than-expected trash volume and revenue from the sale of steam generated by the facility is just the start. New federal air pollution control technology requirements taking effect in 2005 are expected to cost the county another \$3 million. The county last year considered an offer from Barlow Projects of Colorado to buy the incinerator and do the air pollution upgrade. But the \$7 million bid would have been offset by the same amount when the county sold the facility to the company in 2013.

"Bottom line: Instead of trying to sell the incinerator – and continuing to incur huge operating costs from an old, outdated RRF [resource recovery facility] – the commissioners should consider closing down the incinerator," said the Recycling Jackson newsletter last fall. "The decision to incinerate our trash may have been appropriate at the time, but 17 years later it is obvious that it

does not make financial sense for the citizens of Jackson County.”

Economics Slam Doors on Central Wayne's Incinerator

Located in Dearborn Heights, an incinerator owned by the Central Wayne County Sanitation Authority has been shutdown since August 2003 because Central Wayne Energy Recovery Limited Partnership, the firm that operates the facility, defaulted on \$80 million in bonds. The tax-exempt bonds were made available by the state of Michigan to private investors in the 1990s to retrofit the facility to a “waste-to-energy” facility. The state also provided a \$5 million grant for the retrofit. The Limited Partnership filed for bankruptcy on December 29, 2003.

Serving the five communities of Dearborn Heights, Westland, Wayne, Garden City and Inkster and

their 300-tons-per-day of garbage, the incinerator, built in the 1960s, was upgraded to meet then-extant

member communities, the incinerator is insolvent. In addition to other claims, the burner owes Dearborn



photo: Brad van Guilder

The children of Federal Elementary School (Taylor School District) get a close view of the Central Wayne trash incinerator every day from their playground.

air pollution standards with the help of a local millage enacted in the mid-1980s. One argument used in favor of propping up the incinerator was a prediction that Michigan landfill fees would top \$100 by 1999 – more than four times what came about.

More than half of the waste burned at the Dearborn Heights incinerator came from outside the five communities – some of it from as far away as Arizona, according to Sierra Club advocate and Ecology Center board member Ed McArdle. It has generated continuing pollution and odor complaints despite the upgrade, violating its state air permit more than 1200 times in the four years before its shutdown. Despite \$63-a-ton rates charged to

Heights \$1 million in back taxes.

Arguing that the bankruptcy proceedings mean discussions about its future must be handled in secret, attorneys for the communities have warned local officials not to disclose details. But it is known that several firms have visited the facility and expressed interest in taking it over. Meanwhile, many citizens and some officials argue the shutdown should become permanent. They argue disposal capacity is available and cheaper, incinerator ash disposal capacity is nearly used up and the ash is costly to take elsewhere, and recycling could reduce waste.

Westland City Councilperson Cheryl Graunstadt, who first became active politically after the discovery of a leaking dump at her daughter's Cooper School in 1991, points out she is “no poster child for landfills” but chafes at the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that may restart the incinerator. She notes she opposed the plant's conversion to a waste-to-energy

A Downward Trend for Michigan Waste Incinerators

Municipal Solid Waste Incinerators

1994	6 facilities
2001	4 facilities

Other Solid Waste Incinerators (Pathological, Sewage Sludge, Industrial)

1994	89 facilities
2001	36 facilities

Medical Waste Incinerators

1994	31 facilities
2001	1 facility

Source: Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Air Quality Division. 2001 is latest year for which emissions inventory data is available.

facility in the mid-1990s.

"The latest development with the shutdown and now the bankruptcy situation makes it all the more crucial that more dialogue takes place between elected officials and the public, and not less," says Graunstadt. "To expect current council members to even have an inkling of what is at stake without detailed discussions is ridiculous and unfair to the public they were elected to represent. There has been no debate, no cost comparisons, no independent feasibility study, nothing to help a council to decide what direction they should consider for their communities."

Local support for recycling as an alternative to the incinerator appears to be growing. Pointing out that city residents "no longer have the luxury of mindlessly forgetting about where their trash is going," the *Dearborn Heights Press and Guide* editorialized recently that "recycling is the only option that won't leave our cities blanketed in smog, our waters thick with toxic ooze, and our land filled with rotting garbage."

Other communities have long since agreed. Two large municipal waste incinerators – one in Madison Heights operated by the Southeast Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority and the Grosse Pointe Clinton incinerator in Wayne County – shut down in the 1990s, partly for cost reasons. The Grosse Pointe Clinton shutdown terminated the single largest source of mercury emissions to the air in the state.

The only relatively non-controversial waste incinerator in Michigan is the 625-ton-per-day Kent County Waste-to-Energy Facility, operating since 1990. In the year 2000 the facility incinerated 179,739 tons of solid waste while only about 11,000 tons of material were diverted from county landfills by local recycling programs.

Citizens in most communities

closest to incineration are ready to be done with the facilities because of cost, if nothing else. Yet a commitment to recycling among these communities – and state policymakers – is still lacking.

"Once people find out how harmful these incinerators are to their health and their wallets, then they will force their closure," says McArdle.

"My personal belief is that it shouldn't be so difficult to do the right thing, but it is when there is a political unwillingness to do it," says Jackson's Fojtasek. "The key is to educate our local officials and leaders." He says Recycling Jackson hopes to include recycling in a platform for the future

of Jackson now being drawn up by a local coalition of business leaders, the Enterprise Group.

If the group succeeds, it will be one of the final triumphs in the public's struggle to halt incineration – a solution touted by government officials that never won acceptance among the citizenry.

Dave Dempsey is the Michigan Environmental Council's Policy Advisor and a Senior Consultant to the Ecology Center.

Ecology Center Campaigns to Put Out the Trash Burners

The Ecology Center is working with local activists in three of the four Michigan communities that still use trash incinerators to close down the facilities, and to start good recycling programs.

In the central Wayne County suburbs of Westland, Dearborn Heights, Wayne, Garden City, and Inkster, Ecology Center organizer Brad van Guilder and board member Ed McArdle are leaders of the Stop the Burn Coalition, which has been urging the five city councils to keep the temporarily closed Central Wayne Incinerator shut forever. For more information, contact Brad at bradvlg@ecocenter.org or (734) 663-2400 ext. 114.

In the City of Detroit, van Guilder and Environmental Health staffer Mary Beth Doyle are working with the Sierra Club and other members of the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition to persuade city officials to reduce air pollution, improve Detroit's image, and maybe even save money, by shutting down the largest incinerator in the U.S. Contact Brad for more information about the Detroit campaign.

And in Jackson, Ecology Center staff has consulted with Recycling Jackson and area environmentalists about the Jackson County incinerator. While this campaign is in its early stages, the overwhelming financial and environmental case against the facility has led the local newspaper to editorialize against incineration. For more information, contact Travis Fojtasek of Recycling Jackson at fojtasek@msu.edu or (517) 788-7378.