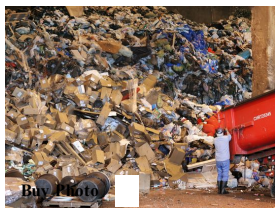


New city contract allows all single family homes to recycle

Barb Berggoetz, barb.berggoetz@indystar.com 1:02 p.m. EDT August 6, 2014



(Photo: Matt Detrich/The Star)

Despite objections from recycling advocates and some City-County Council Democrats, a city board decided Wednesday to move forward with Republican Mayor Greg Ballard's city recycling proposal.

The action will provide recycling for 100 percent of Indianapolis single family residences — with no tax or rate increase — but opponents contend it's a "step backward" and not a good, long-term solution for the city.

The Board of Public Works voted 4-1, with member Gregory Garrett voting "no," to contract with Covanta, a New Jersey-based waste-to-energy provider. The contract calls for Covanta to invest \$45 million to build a recycling center by 2016 near its current southside incineration facility.

"We look forward to working with recycling leaders in Indianapolis to make Indy a world-class recycling city," said Scott Holkeboer, Covanta's vice president of business management, in a statement.

Company officials say the new center will be the first completely sustainable, closed-loop waste management system in North America.

Residents who want to continue separating their recycled materials and use existing curbside and drop-off programs can continue to do so. But only about 10 percent of residents do that, with under 6 percent of recyclables being recovered.

When the center is operational, Covanta says its goal is to recycle from 80 to 90 percent of recyclable materials put in with regular trash pick-ups. Covanta collects all of the city's garbage now but burns it at an incinerator on South Harding.

But the contract with the city only guarantees 18 percent recovery of recyclable materials, stressed recycling advocates who doubt existing technology can cleanly separate up to 90 percent of the recyclables.

"There's going to be so little recovered and it's going to be so contaminated that we won't be able to use what's recovered, for the most part," said Carey Hamilton, executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition.

Because of this, she said "alarm bells went off across the supply chain" when recycling companies first heard about the proposal at the end of last year.

Other objections came from the Recycling Industries Coalition, a group of organizations and corporations in the recycling business. The group sent a letter to Ballard, the City-Council Council and the Public Works Board on Tuesday expressing their "strong concern" about the viability of the proposal.

Under the plan, Covanta's Advanced Recycling Center on South Harding Street will accept most waste in one giant pile and separate it by recycling type via machines. Company officials say that modern waste sensors make the sorting more efficient than it has been in the past and that opponents' complaints are exaggerated.

Before the vote, John Barth, City-County Council vice president, said the proposal doesn't allow for recycling glass and makes paper nearly impossible to recycle. In addition, he said estimates of an 18 percent recovery rate for recycled material are far below other Indiana cities and leading cities nationally.

But Dennis Rosebrough, board member, said, "I don't think we should let perfect prevent the good. If the goal is to recycle, this improves recycling."

Hamilton, along with Barth, wanted the city to wait to take action for three months until it considered another recycling plan that advocates recently proposed to the city. She said the city could have potentially utilize multi-million-dollar state grant money and an interest-free loan from a new national Closed Loop Fund.

The \$100 million fund is supported by global companies wanting to expand curbside municipal recycling, including in Indianapolis, she said. The curbside program would pay for itself and pay off the loan, Hamilton said.

But Marc Lotter, spokesman for Ballard, said at no time did any council or coalition member come up with any viable fund option and other municipalities have had problems with that Closed Loop Fund.

Barth contended the proposal is financially a bad deal for the city and taxpayers.

“Review of the contract fine print shows if the city finds a better way to recycle more material, Indianapolis will have to pay Covanta \$4 million a year through 2028 as a penalty,” Barth said.

He said the city also will have to pay 70 percent of Covanta’s property taxes for the life of the contract, as well as the 100 percent it already pays for the company’s current facility.

The contract, he contends, discourages promoting recycling by reducing the city’s profit sharing if recycling curbside collection goes up more than 5 percent from the year before.

The contract will take effect as soon as it’s signed by public works director Lori Miser.

Call Star reporter Barb Berggoetz at (317) 444-6294. Follow her on Twitter: @barberg.

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