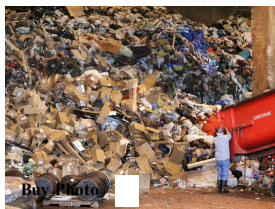


City's new recycling plan trashed by critics

John Tuohy, john.tuohy@indystar.com 9:52 a.m. EDT June 11, 2014



(Photo: Matt Detrich/The Star)

Environmentalists are howling over a plan by Mayor Greg Ballard to streamline recycling at a new \$45 million sorting plant, arguing that it would not maximize the amount of trash that gets re-used and would doom a curbside collection program.

Covanta recycling

The city is finishing up negotiations to extend a 10-year contract with Covanta Indianapolis, which incinerates all the city's trash. Under the new contract, much of the trash would be recycled at a new sorting plant next to the incinerator in the 2300 block of South Harding Street.

The administration says the move will increase the amount of recycled waste fivefold, won't cost the city or taxpayers anything and will increase citizen participation in recycling from 10 percent to 100 percent. Covanta would pay for the construction of the new sorting plant.

"The plant collects all the garbage in the city, will sort out the paper, cardboard, plastic and metal," said Marc Lotter, a spokesman for Ballard. "It will dramatically increase the volume of recycled material and everybody will be participating."

But environmentalists contend such plants — that put all the trash in one "stream" and then separate materials — aren't as efficient or "clean" as plants that process trash that has been sorted beforehand.

The critics argue that it would be wiser to bolster the city's lackluster curbside recycling program by making it free. Carey Hamilton, executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition, said the existing \$6 monthly fee is the reason participation has hovered at 10 percent for years, one of the lowest in the country for cities of similar size.

"The IRC hopes that the mayor will consider a better solution, a more effective recycling solution, that would also be free for residents of Marion County," Hamilton said. "That is the gold standard for cities across the country. Indianapolis deserves a first-class recycling program."

ELSEWHERE IN MARION COUNTY: [Lawrence contracts with Republic for trash recycling service \(/story/news/local/marion-county/2013/12/15/lawrence-contracts-with-republic-for-trash-recycling-service/4017901/\)](#)

MONEY: [Indiana wasting job opportunities by not recycling more, report says \(/story/money/2013/12/04/indiana-wasting-job-opportunities-by-not-recycling-more-report-says/3872641/\)](#)

The Covanta plant burns trash and converts the energy to steam, which provides heating and cooling to downtown and about half the city. The company shares 12.5 percent of the profits of the steam sales with the city. But the city pays a penalty if the volume of trash brought to the incinerator drops below 300,000 tons a year.

The city's 10-year contract with Covanta expires in 2018 but has an option for renewal for another five or 10 years. The mayor can extend the contract without City-County Council approval, a concern to some council members and recycling proponents, who are urging him to slow down.

"Why would we replace an awful recycling program with something that is terrible?" asked council member John Barth. "We need a full and transparent discussion and need to do it right."

Lotter stressed that curbside service was not going away; residents could still recycle that way if they please.

"Nobody is ending curbside," Lotter said. "Anyone who wants it can join or remain in it."

But critics predict the plant will encourage the few residents in the curbside program to drop out because it is cheaper and more convenient.

Covanta vice president of business operations Scott Holkeboer said the new plant will be cleaner than similar plants because it will be mostly automated with sensors that allow it to do a better job sorting — snagging about 80 percent to 90 percent of paper, plastics and metal.

But the plant will not recycle glass — for now — because the economic market for it is flat. Holkeboer said the machines can be easily retrofitted in the future if the market for glass improves. Environmentalists contend glass should be recycled.

Though Covanta estimates the plant will create 60 permanent jobs, Jesse Kharbanda, executive director of the Hoosier Environmental Council, said a robust curbside program would create even more jobs.

He called for an "open, broad public deliberation."

"I just seems like there is a rush to give up on curbside," Kharbanda said. "There are very high (participation) rates in other cities where curbside is free. We can achieve that."

Other cities that don't charge separately for curbside service or have incorporated it into the cost of general trash collection saw quick spikes in participation. In Columbus, Ohio, participation went from 5 percent to 70 percent. Louisville, Ky., and Detroit also saw gains.

Barth said he has scheduled a meeting before the Community Affairs Committee on July 9 to learn more about Ballard's plan.

"This needs a transparent discussion, and the council needs to be informed," he said. "Leaving glass out is not acceptable. Let's do it the right way."

An organization called the Closed Loop Fund wrote a letter to the mayor offering to provide a no-interest loan to help develop a better curbside program.

The fund is bankrolled by some of the world's largest companies, including Wal-Mart and Coca-Cola, and its chief executive officer is the former recycling czar in New York City.

"A focus on on a robust curbside recycling program has proven to be the most financially prudent and environmentally sound way" to manage a major urban waste management program," wrote Ron Gonen, CEO of the Closed Loop Fund.

"For all the good he's done with sustainability, I feel like this could hurt his reputation," Kharbanda said.

VIDEO: [Butler University students assess trash, recycling \(/videos/news/education/2014/04/17/7833745/\)](#)

JOHNSON COUNTY: [Recycling District helps residents reuse, reduce landfill waste \(/story/news/local/johnson-county/2013/11/09/recycling-district-helps-johnson-county-residents-reuse-reduce-landfill-waste/3478919/\)](#)

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