

Part I: When a recycling deal isn't good for a city

WHEN MAYOR GREG BALLARD leaves office the end of this year, he will most certainly be remembered as the “greenest” of all this city’s mayors. We have many, many more bicycle lanes than when he took office eight years ago. We have an Office of Sustainability. We have a more environmentally friendly City-County Building, and soon a fleet of electric cars for City officials to use.

And so, when the administration announced a major initiative to create a “single-bin solution,” you might think that the recycling community would immediately jump on board.

You would be wrong.

The City’s plan is this: Residents will put all – emphasize all – of their trash in curbside bins. The trash would be sent to a newly constructed \$45 million Advanced Recycling Center, where the recyclables would be sorted. Covanta, the company which currently operates the City’s trash incinerator, said the new recycling facility will greatly increase the percentage of the waste which can be recycled. What the proposed system would do is send all of the city’s trash – recyclables, along with dirty diapers and rotten food – to the Advanced Recycling Center.

Ballard has been quoted as calling the deal “a common-sense solution” which will take Indianapolis “from a 10-percent recycling rate to 100 percent.” Paul Gilman, Covanta’s chief sustainability officer, said this: “Critics of our plan have been misinforming the public about the benefits of our single-bin solution that will gain 100-percent participation from the public and increase the recycling rate by up to 500 percent without costing the taxpayers or residents a dime.”

The key word in that last quote is “critics.” There are plenty of them. They are standing in line. And they are suing the City. More about that later.

One of those critics is Carey Hamilton, executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition (headquartered, by the way, in Lockerbie Square). Over a year and a half ago, Hamilton voiced her organization’s objections to the Covanta deal in a letter to the mayor. “Indianapolis is a first-class city that deserves best-in-class recycling,” Hamilton wrote. “Covanta’s proposal does not provide this. At best, it achieves a 24% recycling rate (producing low-quality, low-value material) while confounding residents with the message that now recycling will happen with no separation.”

Hamilton’s opinion should carry some weight. She is, after all, the head of a not-for-profit organization with a membership including state and local governments, business, industry,

not-for-profits and individuals. The coalition supports such environmental concepts as source reduction, reuse, composting and recycling.

But the most important thing to note here is that Hamilton’s organization is far from alone in opposition to the Covanta deal. That April 2014 letter referred to above was also signed by officials with the Hoosier Beverage Association, Monarch Beverage Co., Pratt Industries, Alcoa Recycling, Amcor Rigid Plastics, Knauf Insulation, Perpetual Recycling Solutions and Strategic Materials.

Other industries against the Covanta plan comprise an organi-



**BABBLIN’
BROOKS**

*Musings from the editor
about life downtown
(or just about anything else
he wants to write about.)*

By Bill Brooks

“Indiana produces more glass than any other state but California,” Hamilton wrote in an essay for The Indianapolis Star last year. “Our glass industry could use every bit of glass Indy residents generate.” She argued that reducing the amount of recycled glass will hurt those many companies and cost workers jobs.

Those in opposition to the plan have crunched many numbers associated with the deal – arriving at the conclusion that it’s a bad financial deal for Indianapolis and won’t come close to achieving the percentage increases in recycling which it claims. Other legitimate funding options have also been brought forth, but fell on deaf City ears.

Hamilton said the consensus in the recycling community – including those many for-profit recycling companies – is that there is no evidence backing up Covanta’s claims. She labeled the City’s plan “a forever mediocre program.” Worse yet, Hamilton also pointed out that the contract would require the City to pay a \$4 million penalty if any other new recycling programs or initiatives are created.

As it stands today, the Covanta plan is a done deal, signed by City officials. But Hamilton said that doesn’t mean concerned citizens can’t still have an impact. Because it turns out it just might not be such a done deal after all. A group of industries has filed suit against the City, alleging that due process wasn’t followed when the contract was awarded.

The lawsuit was rejected by a Marion County judge, but that decision was appealed to the Indiana Court of Appeals.

Part II: Another year of nostalgia

IN THE 21 YEARS I have called Downtown Indy home, it has been a unique, interesting place.

But not always dynamic, not like it is these days. Walk along Mass Ave or visit Fountain Square most evenings these days and you can feel the energy, the electricity.

But where once the strongest draw was art galleries, most of which are now long gone, the attraction now is more likely food and beverage. And entertainment.

Those many years ago, the areas around Downtown needed to shout their presence. On Mass Ave, merchants united to stage quarterly events to gain the city’s attention. Eventually boosted by funding from the now-

defunct Indianapolis Cultural Development Commission, “cultural districts” such as Mass Ave and Fountain Square slowly gained traction, morphing into the hustle-bustle of today.

Difficult to determine when the cultural districts turned that corner. Probably not any particular month or year, although just perhaps 2012 was an important milestone along the way. Which is convenient, because 2012 is where we find ourselves this month, as this column continues its year-by-year reminiscence of the first decade of Urban Times.

In March of that year, Urban Times published a photo essay labeled “Building boom.” Trail Side on Mass Ave was being erected. So too was The Hinge in Fletcher Place. A for-

mer restaurant supply building was evolving into a residential project known as 1010 Central. Under construction also was The Braxton at Lugar Tower, changing the landscape of Fort Wayne Avenue.

In September, the Indianapolis Housing Authority gained approval of its plan to surround Barton Tower with a multi-story mixed-use development.

And in December, plans were unveiled for an even more ambitious project just across the street, in the 500 block of Mass Ave: A major mixed-use project to replace the fire station, fire headquarters and firefighters’ credit union. (That project, by the way, had its first hearing

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zation called The Paper Recycling Coalition. One opposition letter is signed by 14 members of that group, including the Steel Recycling Institute, Glass Packaging International, the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, Fusion Paperboard, PaperWorks and Graphic Packaging International.

“Our association and its members believe that mixed-waste treatment of recyclable materials is a step backward in the effort to recover recyclable materials from the waste stream,” wrote Charles D. Johnson, vice-president for policy of the Aluminum Association. Furthermore, the Covanta plan does not even allow for recycling glass.

Arguments from both sides are due by late October, and its possible oral arguments will be heard in November. A ruling isn’t likely until next year.

Here’s hoping the Court of Appeals tosses the deal. Here’s hoping the City, sent back to the drawing board, will open the closed doors and let the public – and private enterprise – sound off on which way the city’s recycling effort should go.

Despite his impressive green track record, it appears likely that the mayor has backed the wrong horse in this particular environmental race. And we all know there’s a reason why horses are last in any parade. ■



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