Advocates continue push to halt Indianapolis MRF

By Dan Leif, Resource Recycling

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Though the Indianapolis mayor's office has indicated a deal is done to bring a mixed-waste MRF to the city, opponents of the plan say the facility can still be stopped and that support for their cause is growing.

The office of the city's mayor, Greg Ballard, announced last month it had reached a deal with Covanta to construct a $45 million center to sort recyclables from municipal solid waste. Such facilities are sometimes called "dirty MRFs" and they allow for collection systems in which residents throw trash and recyclables in one curbside receptacle.

However, the Indiana Recycling Coalition (IRC) and a member of the Indianapolis city council say there's still time to stop the plan, which they argue was finalized without a full public vetting process and without considering other options for boosting recycling activity in the city of 820,000.

"The messaging on the Covanta deal from the mayor's office is, 'Don't worry we've got this done,'" said John Barth, an at-large member of the Indianapolis-Marion County City-County Council. "That's not a good sustainable approach for the future of the city, to just go ahead and say, 'Throw everything away.'"

Barth, who chairs the council's community affairs committee, put the recycling issue on the agenda for the committee's July 22 meeting, offering residents and industry members an opportunity to voice concerns and discuss alternative proposals. Neither the committee nor city council has the authority to block the Covanta deal, but the hope is to generate enough outcry to grab the attention of the city's board of public works, the entity that must approve the project by vote if it is to move forward.

"What I'm hoping to do is create a forum where the public can really understand what we're doing here is making a generational decision without having significant public input," Barth said.

The public works board, which includes a number of members who were appointed by the mayor, has not scheduled a vote on the issue, but it was slated to hold a meeting this week in which individuals on both sides of the debate would have an opportunity to voice their positions.

Consequently, the IRC has initiated a campaign to encourage residents and industry to reach out to the board with concerns. "The board of public works is allowing public testimony, which is not something they normally do," said Carey Hamilton, IRC's executive director. "It's a sign that people are being heard."

The Indianapolis mayor's office has argued the mixed-waste MRF is the best approach for a city that has experimented with different curbside offerings in the past but failed to see significant participation. Currently, Indianapolis residents can subscribe for curbside recyclables collection through individual haulers. "The Covanta proposal requires no funding from the government, no increased rates for taxpayers, and no government mandates being issued on the actions of the general public," said Marc Lotter, a spokesperson from the mayor's office.

Barth said the mayor's office is oversimplifying a complex problem. He said that if the city truly wants to revamp its recycling infrastructure it will need to figure out a multifaceted plan to integrate curbside into a system that currently involves many haulers with different contract terms.

"The mayor has an affinity for one-size-fits-all solutions," said Barth, "but in a complex city of nearly 1 million people, one-size-fits-all is not always the right decision."

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