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-ative to create a “single-bin solution,” you might think that the recycling community would immediately jump on board.

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