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Subject:Letter to Editor of Boston Globe

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From:Nickolas Themelis <njt1@columbia.edu>

To:letter@globe.com

Dear Editor,

In today's Globe (October 20, 2008) there was an editorial that while acknowledging the benefits of incinerators (avoiding transportation of solid wastes to distant states and methane emissions from landfills) it also castigated the state's master plan for proposing to build new incinerators "without first exhausting approaches to waste disposal that have proved environmentally friendly." As the head of a large research group at Columbia University (www.columbia.edu/cu/earth) that has studied all means of waste management for the last twelve years, I am curious to know what are these approaches and where are they practiced? The Columbia/BioCycle survey of 2004 national data showed that Massachusetts has a recycling rate of 33.8% which is higher than the national average of 28.5%. It also has a landfilling rate of only 29.2% (vs national of 64.1% and California's 58.9%) thanks to the foresight of communities that helped build incinerators in the eighties and nineties. Your Editor should take a trip to my own community of Sandwich in Cape Cod that along with another forty communities, from south Boston to the entire Cape Cod and the Islands, agreed to the building of the SEMASS incinerator that by now combusts one million tons of post-recycling municipal solid wastes. This one incinerator allowed the closing of about seventy landfills in a radius of sixty miles from its location at Rochester, MA. One of these landfills was near my home in the historic area of Sandwich. It is now my delight to take our wastes to this landfill that by now has been closed and converted into a recycling station where citizens deposit their recyclables and compostables in several separate receptacles. However, as your Editor will see during his visit, despite all the goodwill and efforts of the citizens to recycle, at least as much and more is not recyclable and is going to the SEMASS waste-to-energy plant ("incinerator"). If there were no SEMASS, it would have to go to distant landfills because, irrespective of the rhetoric and polemics, there are only two ways to manage post-recycling waste:

By landfilling in regulation landfills or by combustion with energy recovery in modern incinerators.

Prof. Nickolas Themelis, Columbia University and Taxpayer, Sandwich, MA

"EVER SINCE the state put a moratorium on new solid-waste incinerators in 1990, residents have been spared the pollutants such facilities would emit. Now the state is working on a solid-waste master plan that might allow new incinerators that turn waste into energy. While the high price of conventional energy points up the need for alternative fuels with low greenhouse gas emissions, the state should be cautious about allowing even these advanced incinerators without first exhausting approaches to waste disposal that have proved environmentally friendly.

The pressures for permitting new incinerators are significant, ranging

from the high cost of conventional energy to the cost of shipping the 21 percent of the state's waste now going to out-of-state landfills. Also, new technologies can create a synthetic gas fuel from waste without, advocates say, the emission of toxic pollutants.

But any state master plan worth its salt should begin with the basics: minimize society's use of materials, especially ones containing toxic substances; repair and reuse more products; and recycle such materials as paper, plastic, metal, and glass for new applications. And incinerators aren't the only way to turn waste into fuel; a process called anaerobic digestion can turn organic waste into a usable gas fuel.

Massachusetts, with its flat recycling rate, has been a laggard in these areas. This is no surprise in light of the paltry \$2.7 million the state spends to help communities start or beef up their recycling programs. This is a tiny fraction of the \$37.8 million the state pockets annually in unredeemed bottle and can deposits, which were originally supposed to go to recycling.

Some communities are now experimenting with single-stream recycling, in which households can put out all their recyclables in one container. The technique has shown it can raise recycling rates. The state should help many more towns and cities follow suit. Another spur to more recycling would be extending the nickel deposit to containers of water, juices, and other drinks that aren't subject to the Bottle Bill.

Advocates of new waste-to-energy conversion facilities argue, quite rightly, that sending waste out of state carries a high environmental cost. Not only does the shipping consume diesel, but the buried waste produces methane, a far more destructive greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Also, the waste often contaminates ground water.

But all these valid points argue just as strongly for never letting so much material end up in landfills or ovens in the first place. That should be Job 1 of the state's new master plan for solid waste.http://cache.boston.com/bonzai-fba/File-Based Image Resource/dingbat_story_end_icon.gif

Charles Stefanini

c/o Capitol Strategies LLC

11 Beacon Street, Suite 1120

Boston, MA 02108

cell 781-249-0562

work 617-367-6600 x4

fax 617-227-1616

cas@capitolstrategies-llc.com