Politics over progress

Athens' only landfill might be forced to close its doors to municipal waste trucks within a week unless the ministry of finance stops blocking payments to the site's developer. Petty squabbling among ministerial, regional and local authorities is again to blame

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Attica's five million inhabitants - almost half the Greek population - produce over five thousand tonnes of waste each day. Within days they might have to live with it at their doorstep warns the manager of the capital's only legal landfill in Ano Liosia. Its existing facilities are almost full and work on its last cell - which would tie Athenians over until an emergency landfill is constructed in the autumn - has stopped because the ministry of finance has frozen payments to the developer, Helector.

"The landfill has enough space for another week. After that I will have to close it as there will be no more space. The last cell is under construction but work has now stopped," says Costas Mnimatidis, waste manager for the Association of Attica's Communities and Municipalities that manages the Ano Liosia site. Meanwhile, workers at the landfill complain that the waste mountains already exceed their approved height and that their health and safety are endangered.

The developer is owed over 4.5 million euros and has been waiting for the money for over a year. Helector's Dimitris Grammatas explains to the Athens News that it is impossible for the company to continue works, incurring further costs, when it is uncertain that it will get paid for the contract. "We are not a charitable foundation. The company is owed a significant amount of money and to assist Athens with its waste
management problem we have even undertaken urgent works to extend the landfill at ESDKNA's request. These works are not yet part of the contract and have to be added to what is already owed." According to Grammatas, Helector was instructed to double the size of the landfill's last two cells and has thus extended its lifespan by another eight months. "Unless we did the work, there would be no legal landfill now for Athens to dump its garbage. The last cell is 95 percent complete but we are looking for assurances from the ministry of finance that they will continue the flow of payments," Grammatas says.

**Wasting away time and funds**

The reasons behind this last waste management muddle are quite hard to fathom for an outsider. Essentially they boil down to the following: Attica's landfill has a budget of 21 million euros of which the European Union has agreed to pay 16 million. Construction began in 2002 and the project will be complete when work on this last cell is wrapped up.

Waste is buried in the landfill's insulated cells, and the juices it produces over time are extracted and directed to a biological processing unit that cleans them up and redirects the water extracted for irrigation. The remains are dumped back in the landfill. Ano Liosia should have two functioning systems for this process but neither of them is currently functional. According to Mnimatidis, the first one was damaged by a landfill in March 2003, for which ESDKNA blames the sludge dumped in the landfill by Athens' biological sewage processing plant situated on the island of Psytalleia.

Completion of the second unit hinges on power supply. Completion of an on-site electricity generator, which would provide power to the processing units, has been delayed. And the installation cannot use the national power grid because the Ano Liosia municipal planning authorities are not issuing the necessary paperwork. Local mayor, Nikos Papadimas, is at odds with ESDKNA on a number of issues and is trying to fight off the creation of a new landfill in Western Attica. It now seems that the paperwork has become some sort of bargaining tool.

As a result of this palaver, neither processing unit works. Liquids originating from the site have in the past - mainly after heavy rainfalls - escaped on two known occasions, polluted local waterways and ended up in the Saronic Gulf some 20 kilometres away. ESDKNA has been convicted twice in the last two years for such incidents and has been fined over 80,000 euros. The association now maintains that it redirects the landfill
liquids round its system and there are no leakages. However, according to *Athens News* sources disintegrating Ano Liosia waste produces over 600 cubic metres of such liquids a day, which renders these claims highly improbable.

"We are confident that everything will be complete and functioning by the end of October and are drafting the relevant finance ministry committee a letter on this issue as we speak. But I find it unacceptable that national funds are spent when we have already secured European funding and there is no reason for us not asking for it," Mnimatidis tells the *Athens News*. ESDKNA has earlier promised to complete the works by the end of June.

**Juicy waste**

So far 12.8 million has been spent but the Greek government for the landfill - and in particular the finance ministry's committee for the administration of European cohesion funds - has yet to ask the EU for any money. According to EU legislation - published on the ministry of finance's website - the Greek government was entitled to receive 20 percent of the money the EU pledged right after the project's approval and before the conclusion of the bidding process. It was also entitled to ask for intermediary payments by the EU that together with the 20 percent deposit would cover most of the EU's contribution. But on June 24, the committee wrote to ESDKNA informing the association that it has yet to ask the EU for any money for the landfill in Ano Liosia because the filtering facilities for the waste liquids are still incomplete. The committee adds that Greece is in danger of losing European funds. *Athens News* is baffled by the committee's decision not to apply for the European deposit. When it contacted the committee, it was told that the official responsible for the decision is on leave. "But things are not a simple as they look to the naked eye. Ano Liosia is not a virgin ground," enigmatically added a ministry employee who wants to remain anonymous.

It is estimated Attica spends well over 100 million euros each year for its waste management. As a result, regional and local authorities have long been vying over the spoils.