

Waste not

Spitzer should focus on turning garbage into renewable energy

By ALYSSA A. LAPPEN and JACK D. LAUBER Eliot Spitzer, listen up.

First published: Sunday, December 3, 2006

This is another in an occasional series of articles on issues Eliot Spitzer will face when he becomes governor on Jan. 1.

California, which has nation's toughest environmental laws, has just unveiled its "Roadmap for the Development of Biomass." Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger seeks to boost California's wind, solar and biomass projects, and to eventually extract 22 percent of California's energy feedstocks from urban wastes.

Last March, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously adopted a 20-year-plan to re-engineer its garbage disposal system and switch to waste-to-energy, eliminating transport costs and pollution.

The New York City Council, by contrast, adopted a garbage-export plan last July. Rather than harness trash to generate energy, New York City taxpayers will continue to export garbage, and pollution risks, at a cost of more than \$600 million a year for residential trash alone.

Misguided Schenectady exports its waste for landfilling near Rochester. And Albany plans to encroach on pristine lands in the Pine Bush Nature Preserve to expand its landfill.

New York City is the largest U.S. metropolis relying on other states to dump its garbage. It exports at least 4 million tons of residential municipal solid waste a year, at a cost of more than \$100 a ton more than double the potential price per ton to handle trash around New York state.

Add to that the loss of at least \$50 a ton in potential revenues from local waste-to-energy electrical generation. If the city burned even 70 percent of its residential garbage, current state-of-the-art technology could produce sufficient electrical power to light 236,000 homes and help avoid blackouts.

The United States now uses only 20 percent of its renewable waste fuels to generate energy. But waste-to-energy plants in Hempstead on Long Island and Onondaga County and Massachusetts' SEMASS facility prove that municipal and solid wastes can effectively serve as significant biomass energy sources, generating clean electrical energy.

Continuing on New York City's current track, though, will generate incalculable costs. Diesel trucks emit five times more particulate matter per ton of municipal solid waste they transport than burning it in waste-to-energy facilities. Consequently, the city's new

waste plan guarantees long-term low pollution from transport, millions of gallons of wasted diesel fuel consumption, and increased health risks.

New York City's policy will shift some transport to barges and rails. But they burn diesel fuels, too and will perpetuate traffic snarls and toxic emissions near waste transfer stations. Moreover, future, as-yet unspecified destinations which could include states as distant as Alabama could cost New York City even more per ton, says Eileen Berenyi, president of Governmental Advisory Associates, a Westport, Conn., waste consulting firm.

Unfortunately, using obsolete data, local and national organizations, like the New York Public Interest Research Group and the Sierra Club, argue that waste-to-energy's dangers outweigh its advantages. Rather than "zero waste" generation an impossible goal anti-burn activists should seek the achievable zero waste disposal.

Controlled, multistage waste-to-energy plants have virtually eliminated emissions. Such plants have cut dioxins and other toxic emissions by 99 percent or more in the last decade, the Environmental Protection Agency reports. In the United States, total waste-to-energy plant emissions, combined, reach only 12 grams of dioxin annually, less than 0.5 percent of all dioxins nationwide. Even California recognizes the value and minimal risk of waste-to-energy technology. Residue can be recycled into road-building and construction materials, and valuable metals.

In 2004, New York's Public Service Commission implemented Renewable Portfolio Standards. They require electric companies to provide 25 percent of their power from renewable means by 2013, according to Ted Michaels, of Washington, D.C.'s Integrated Waste Services Association. But New York doesn't list waste-to-energy as a viable, renewable energy resource. The federal government, 11 states and the District of Columbia do.

We also forget that landfills even those reclaiming gases emit far more greenhouse gases than waste-to-energy plants. Organic landfill wastes generate 2 million tons of methane annually, 21 times more potent a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, the EPA reports. Europe largely bans municipal solid waste landfills and obtains electricity and heat for more than 30 million people from waste-to-energy systems.

Every year, landfills also emit thousands of tons of toxins and carcinogens. Citing such problems, Bronx citizens sued New York City for alleged adverse health effects from the Pelham Bay landfill.

Indeed, landfills are toxic time bombs. In past decades, Staten Island buried more than 100 million tons of municipal solid waste, without using landfill liners. Throughout the 21st century, toxins will continue to leach into adjacent wetlands and flow into the air. Disposed household and illicit hazardous wastes will continue to react chemically, generating more contaminants. In landfills equipped with plastic liners, toxins will eventually leak as the liners gradually degrade. But New York blindly creates more

landfills.

New York's governor-elect should focus on the best waste disposal and renewable energy technologies. This would reduce pollution, lower disposal costs, and generate alternate energy all while reducing U.S. dependence on Mideast fuels.

Recycling energy from wastes, anyone?

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