Up in smoke: To burn garbage or prevent waste

By Tim Brownell and Bryan Ukena

ureka Recycling has been tracking the discussions of the Ramsey/Washington Counties Resource Recovery Authority regarding the potential purchase of the Newport Waste Processing Facility. The Resource Recovery Authority's approach is troubling to many of the residents of these two counties, as it is to us, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to demonstrate that waste is completely preventable.

The counties would increase the 20-year subsidy—the county environmental charge of over \$227 million in taxpayer money—for a privately owned facility, with another investment of an additional \$250 million to \$300 million in taxpayer money over the next 20 years to buy and operate an aged processing plant. What is even more troubling is the lack of public awareness of these discussions and the inability of the public to participate in the decision on April 23.

For 20 years, Ramsey and Washington counties have funded waste prevention, recycling and composting for a total of about \$16 million. At the same time, \$227 million has been spent to subsidize the cost of preparing waste at Newport to be burned in Mankato and Red Wing in aged boilers. By the counties' own accounts, taxpayers have subsidized the Newport operation in an amount exceeding the cost to purchase it three times over.

With only a fraction of that funding being spent on recycling, we have now reached a 50 percent recycling rate. However, Ramsey County does not believe we can meet the new recycling and composting goals that were set last year under the leadership of state Senator John Marty and state Representative Frank Hornstein.

We believe we would meet those recycling and composting goals if the counties invested our taxpayer dollars in the same amount over the next 20 years—\$250 million to \$300 million—in reducing, recycling and composting and left the waste to be handled by the private sector. Then, instead of burning waste that is 75 percent recyclable and compostable, these resources would be used by recycling and composting facilities where it would create 10 times the jobs and reduce our collective impact on the environment.

Burning waste contributes to the climate-changing cycle by pulling new resources out of the earth and wasting those resources in incinerators—with over 20 percent of the burned waste then landfilled as toxic ash. Ironically, landfilling was the very thing Ramsey County's Waste to Energy policy was supposed to avoid in the first place.

Incinerators produce more carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide per megawatt hour of electricity than coal-fired power plants. Incinerating our trash is not a solution to greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

Ramsey and Washington counties are contemplating an approach to waste disposal that would require an investment that will last generations. That kind of money is on a par with the \$348 million investment that Minnesotars are putting up to construct the new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings, but with the financial burden carried by the residents of only two of the state's 87 counties and without public input.

Will we as a community support a plan that would literally put taxpayers' dollars up in smoke—burning garbage instead of preventing waste, recycling and composting?

This decision needs public engagement along with the researched consideration of alternatives that protect human health and a process that honors the community that will be ultimately paying the bill.

If you agree with us, we urge you to contact your county commissioner today and let him or her know.

Editor's note: Tim Brownell and Bryan Ukena are copresidents of Twin Cities-based Eureka Recycling, Originally the recycling branch of the St. Paul Neighborhood Energy Consortium (now the Neighborhood Energy Comnection), Eureka became an independent business in 2000 and received nonprofit status in 2001. It is one of only a handful of nonprofit recycling service providers operating in the country today.



Inbox

Current codes don't cut it

I've developed a new hobby: recording the reactions of passersby to the house teardown and rebuild next door to my home in Macalester-Groveland. There have been no accolades. Some of the most frequent comments include, "It's huge," "It's awful," and "It doesn't belong." My favorite was, "It looks like the house is giving the finger to the entire neighborhood."

And so the house teardown/rebuild saga continues. This particular behemoth, coming in just under the city's 30-foot height limit by a couple of inches, dwarfs all of the surrounding homes for many blocks. The houses on either side of it—both two stories—seem to shrink in its looming shadow. Gone is our view of sky, trees and sunsets. Instead, we turn on all of the lights even in the middle of the day and look sadly into our backyard, where the roses and peonies will die for lack of sunlight and the vegetable and herb garden will be no more. Plants, like people, need light to live. St. Paul's Department of Safety and Inspections (DSI)

St. Paul's Department of Satety and Inspections (USL) reports that this house meets current city codes. These codes have been in place for quite some time, but in the past, good taste and good judgment stopped people from building to the full extent of these generous ordinances. Unfortunately, in Macalester-Groveland and Highland Park, good taste and good judgment have apparently gone the way of the dinosaur. In their place, greed for space triumphs, making the owners of normal-size homes feel like they're living in the land of Isllinat

My neighbors and I went down to meet with the folks at DSI with concerns about the house next door and the violations of current city code that the developer has committed. These violations include the lack of notification of an impending teardown—the house came down on January 25, and we were notified of the teardown on February 10—and adding dirt to raise the grade around the foundation.

DSI indicated that there would be no penalties for the developer because the violations were "just a misunderstanding." When I asked the man from DSI what we should do for natural light in our home, he suggested we consider remodeling our house to install "sun tubes" to capture light from above our roof and bring it down into our house. This is the city's response to the disappearance of adequate natural light that these ordinances are designed to protect.

At a recent meeting of the Community Development: Committee of the Highland District Council, a sincere young city planner presented proposed new ordinances for limiting

the square footage and height of new homes. He had given thoughtful consideration to all of the competing interests in the teardown/rebuild debate, and he is to be commended for his efforts. The proposals have merit, and they are a step in the right direction.

However, given that DSI, which is charged with enforcing current codes, will not do its job and hold developers accountable for violating these ordinances, I have little faith that the newer codes will be enforced. The truth is that city officials, from the mayor to the City Council, have been conspicuous in their absence in acting on the concerns of

residents and in dealing with avaricious developers.

I used to think the city was in our corner, on our team. It is not. City officials' hunger for increased tax revenue from these massive homes is trumping the rights of longtime residents. These officials may want to note that though we may no longer have natural light or privacy in our homes, w still have our voices and our votes.

Kathryn Hagger Macalester-Grovelaı

People versus houses

In response to the "concerned neighbors" group and their advertisement in the April 1 Villager. They are first and foremost cowards for not identifying themselves. They do n hesitate to identify the owners of the Crocus Place house where suffered much personal abuse because of this situation. The Pritzkers have lived in the Summit Hill neighborhood I years, have paid taxes, kept their property in great shape and have been good, helpful, supportive neighbors. Everyone in the neighborhood knows the challenges they have had raisi a disabled child.

There are houses in the neighborhood in great need of repair, houses that need new roofs or new gutters, houses lacking any kind of landscaping, houses that have not had anything done to them in years, houses that have third floo rented out with no egress. Many four-, five- and six-bedroo houses in Summit Hill have one person living in them. The is little diversity in the neighborhood, few people of color. And when neighbors go after neighbors, there is not a sens of community that other neighborhoods in St. Paul have.

Will you, the community activists and neighborhood groups, abide by the decision the judge has made or will you continue to harass and try to destroy this family? I don know anyone, myself included, who is a fan of teardowns, levery circumstance is different and needs to be looked at the