

On Island, a yearn to burn

Trash-to-energy incinerators are now a hot commodity

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Burning garbage might seem as outmoded as stirrup pants and big hair - both in vogue when Long Island's four municipal incinerators were built.

But rising fuel costs and other shifts have stirred new local interest in waste-to-energy plants, those towering burners that reduce tons of trash to heaps of ash, creating a bit of electricity along the way.

Covanta Energy Corp. wants to expand capacity by 43 percent at its flagship Westbury plant, the largest on Long Island, which is on land leased from the Town of Hempstead. The Town of Islip plans to more than double the amount of trash burned at its Ronkonkoma incinerator at MacArthur Airport. That would allow it to take garbage from Brookhaven and generate enough energy for 18,000 homes by 2015.

If approved, the plans would increase local incinerator capacity by 36.5 percent and would allow an additional 642,975 tons of trash annually to be burned on Long Island instead of buried in distant landfills.

The relative lack of controversy surrounding the incinerators' proposed expansions contrasts sharply with the atmosphere when they were first built about 20 years ago.

Some saw incinerators as the answer to Long Island's trash disposal crisis after most local landfills closed, a plight dramatized by the 1987 odyssey of a barge loaded with Islip trash that could not find a place to unload. But critics said municipalities were rushing into expensive projects whose technology was unproven; others feared pollution from smokestacks and incinerator ash, concerns that have been tempered by advances in smokestack technology.

Supporters say expanding capacity would save towns money on garbage disposal and help the environment, because fuel-guzzling garbage trucks would be making shorter trips.

"We believe the best thing is for Long Island to solve its waste problems locally," said John Waffenschmidt, Covanta's vice president of environmental science and community affairs. "It is

the environmentally wrong thing to do to long-haul it off the Island. We are banking on the fact that there will be more recognition of the importance of moving away from fossil fuels."

Cuts greenhouse gases, backers claim

The renewed local interest reflects a broader push by the waste-to-energy industry and some academics to recast trash combustion as a "green" disposal strategy. Proponents say it produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions than landfilling and generates valuable energy from materials that would otherwise end up in the ground.

In 2007, Long Island's four local incinerators produced about 4 percent of the 22.7 million megawatt hours consumed here, according to the Long Island Power Authority. That contribution would not much change even if the incinerator expansions go forward, spokesman Ed Dumas said.

Some environmental advocates say waste-to-energy plants are problematic because they burn up materials that could be recycled. And pollution is still a concern, despite improved technology that has reduced toxic emissions of mercury and dioxin. Burning garbage also produces ash that contains heavy metals and must be disposed of in special lined ash fills like those maintained by the towns of Brookhaven and Babylon. Burning reduces a load of garbage to about one-tenth its size in ash.

Expanding incinerators is the wrong approach to Long Island's garbage dilemma, said Allen Hershkowitz, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council. Instead, he said municipalities should focus on whittling the overall waste stream through aggressive recycling and composting.

"Waste-to-energy plants emit about as much greenhouse gases as oil-fueled power plants," Hershkowitz said.

Waffenschmidt said the comparison was inapt because the primary function of Covanta's incinerators is waste disposal, not energy production.

More incinerators than other regions

With plenty of trash and no active municipal garbage dumps - the result of a 1983 law intended to prevent pollution of public drinking water - Long Island already has more incinerators than any other region in the state. But plans to build more stalled in the 1990s amid criticism over cost and pollution. At the same time, hauling garbage away turned out to be more affordable than previously believed, thanks to cheap fuel for trucks and trains and competitive tipping fees at out-of-state landfills.

"So long as costs were reasonable, people didn't mind what happened to the garbage," said David Tonjes, an assistant professor at Stony Brook University who studies waste disposal. "Although we had identified landfilling as something that could cause environmental harm, it was OK for that to happen to other people," he said.

In 2006, about 43 percent of Long Island's garbage went to incinerators, according to a survey Tonjes did of municipal solid waste disposal in Nassau and Suffolk. Another 30 percent was shipped off-Island and 27 percent was recycled.

Nationwide, less than 13 percent of municipal trash went to waste-to-energy plants in 2007, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Avoiding rise and fall in petroleum prices

The proposals to expand the Westbury and Islip waste-to-energy plants come as many Long Island towns are negotiating long-term garbage contracts that will affect residential garbage rates and probably redraw where the region sends its trash. Among the considerations: whether the price stability an incinerator agreement offers will make more sense in the long run than disposal contracts with haulers, where prices often rise and fall with the price of petroleum.

Concerns about climate change may also be driving the interest in incinerators, said Lawrence Swanson, director of Stony Brook's Waste Reduction and Management Institute.

"If you look at total emissions, waste-to-energy comes out to be much cleaner than driving trucks on and off the island," Swanson said. "If you looked at the science, you'd be very favorably impressed."

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What happens to LI's garbage

Long Island produces an estimated 3.5 million tons of garbage each year. Of that:

43 percentage that is incinerated

27 percentage that is recycled

30 percentage that is hauled off-Island

Source: "Municipal Solid Waste Assessment Nassau and Suffolk Counties, Long Island, New York, 2006," Department of Technology and Society, Stony Brook University, August 2007