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Cleveland still seeking OEPA's OK on discarded trash-to-energy plant

City officials want permit process done in case things change

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The city of Cleveland's application for an air emissions permit to build a controversial trash-to-energy plant will hit the hot seat again at an Ohio Environmental Protection Agency public hearing Wednesday night.

But city officials, anticipating the customary blitz of opposition from residents and environmentalists, say they will host their own informational meeting beforehand to reiterate that the city has all but ruled out the technology in favor of more cost-effective alternatives to dumping 230,000 tons of trash every year in a landfill.

The public meeting will be held at 5:30 p.m., followed by the OEPA's hearing at 6 p.m., at the Estabrook Recreation Center on Fulton Road.

The city's original proposal called for compressing trash into pellets, which could be sold as a coal substitute or burned on site to generate electricity for city-owned Cleveland Public Power — a process known as gasification.

Mayor Frank Jackson's administration championed the plan through years of public scrutiny, the crusade of environmental groups and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's declaration that such a project runs the risk of becoming a new major source of pollution for Cuyahoga County.

Then, last month, city-hired consultants concluded that the facility would be too costly to build and operate and could eventually drive up rates for CPP customers. The consultant suggested recycling, composting and anaerobic digestion — a process that escalates decomposition of organic trash — as the most affordable and environmentally friendly options.

But, to the astonishment of some City Council members and City Hall observers, members of the Jackson administration said that the city still would seek permission from the OEPA to build a gasification plant.

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Maureen Harper, chief of communications for Jackson, said seeing the permit process through makes sense given the city's earlier investments in the idea and the possible, though unlikely, chance that changes in the energy market and cost of construction would make the project affordable.

A settlement agreement with fired consultant Peter Tien, who worked on the air emission permit application, also requires the city to show a "good faith effort" to obtain the permit or pay him half of his $1.5 million contract.

Harper said Wednesday's meeting will be the first in a campaign to gather residents' feedback on all of the proposed trash management methods, with hopes of settling on a plan by November.

Last year, the city hired the consulting firm Gershman, Brickner & Bratton to analyze dozens of proposed technologies and issue recommendations based on cost and environmental impact.

Working with a mayoral panel consisting of Chief of Staff Ken Silliman, city Chief Operating Officer Darnell Brown and sustainability chief Jenita McGowan, the consultants narrowed the field to three top suggestions and presented them before City Council last month.

The first features a facility equipped with technology, such as optical scanners, to sort the trash for material that can be recycled.

The remaining garbage would be combed for hazardous materials, then compacted into pellets and sold as a fuel alternative to coal.

The second proposition is the one the city started with, gasification. In this model, the facility still would remove recyclables and compact the remaining trash into pellets. The pellets, however, would be burned on site to produce a synthetic gas, similar in its chemical composition to natural gas. The gas would be captured and burned in a boiler to create steam, which in turn would power a turbine and generator to produce electricity for CPP.

The third option adds anaerobic digestion technology to either of those plans.

Anaerobic digestion involves the use of bacteria to degrade organic materials such as food or leaves in an oxygen-free, temperature-controlled environment, usually a dome-shaped facility, the consultants said. The material can further be composted and used either in agriculture or as landfill cover, and the methane byproduct can be burned to generate electricity.

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