

Cleveland weighs ways of dealing with waste

Critics say city favors previously disputed method

LEILA ATASSI
Plain Dealer Reporter

Seven months after the city of Cleveland decided to "hit the reset button" on plans to build a controversial trash-to-electricity plant, about two dozen companies have sent the city new suggestions on ways to manage garbage.

But many of the proposed ideas are similar to the earlier gasification plan, which called for burning compressed trash pellets to generate electricity for city-owned Cleveland Public Power.

City officials have yet to examine the new submissions. And they maintain that they are committed to considering a variety of technologies, including composting and recycling, as sustainable alternatives to dispatching 230,000 tons of trash to Ohio landfills every year.

Mayor Frank Jackson opened the door to other ideas in April after the gasification concept suffered a beating from environmentalists and some City Council members concerned about pollution and the cost of building the facility.

Critics argue that the mayor's call for new suggestions intimidated a continued preference for methods that convert waste to energy, resulting in submissions predominantly from companies specializing in some aspect of incineration or gasification. And environmentalists say that the city's persistent pursuit of an Ohio Environmental Protection Agency air emissions permit based on the earlier gasification model is a clear indication that Jackson still envisions a gasification plant at the city's Ridge Road garbage transfer station.

"The idea of pursuing an air permit before the city has made a decision contradicts their claim that they haven't made a decision," said Sandy Buchanan, executive director of Ohio Citizen Action. "It's critical that the city listen to the hundreds of Clevelanders who spoke out during public hearings and said, 'We don't want new sources of air pollution. We want strong composting and recycling programs.'"

Gasification first caught Cleveland officials' attention in 2006, when CPP Commissioner Ivan Henderson began searching for ways to diversify the utility's energy sources.

SEE TRASH 1A8

TRASH

FROM A1

Cleveland weighs ways of dealing with waste

Around that time, city officials met with Peter Tien, the president of New Jersey-based Princeton Environmental Group, which held the exclusive U.S. license to the gasification technology produced by Kinsei Sangyo Co. of Japan.

Tien described an environmentally friendly system of superheating and vaporizing compressed garbage pellets, which would lend sustainability to CPP's energy portfolio while reducing trash volume and landfill costs by millions of dollars a year.

The waste-to-energy plant, which would cost a projected \$180 million to build, would create more than 120 jobs and a new revenue source for the city, Tien promised. The excess pellets and recyclables could be sold. Even the ash byproduct could be turned into decorative bricks, Tien said.

In 2010, after the City Council's approval, the city entered into a \$15 million no-bid agreement with

Tien, which required him to design the facility and prepare the city application to obtain an air emissions permit from the Ohio EPA. Tien would be paid only after the permit was granted.

During a public comment period on the permit application, residents sounded alarms about potentially harmful air emissions, including lead and mercury, among other toxic elements. Jackson's administrators said the emissions can be prevented by removing harmful substances beforehand.

Tien, however, was fired in March after city officials said several drafts of his reports were laden with errors and ambiguous calculations of the proposed plant's potential revenue. Environmentalists and council members said they hoped his dismissal marked the death of the gasification proposal.

But less than two weeks later, Henderson, Public Utilities Director Barry Withers and Ken Silliman, Jackson's chief of staff, returned to the council and asked for permission to spend \$200,000 to hire a new consultant. They said the city planned to reopen the request for informal proposals to include any waste management or conversion technologies that, until then, had

been squeezed out of consideration when the city put its faith in Tien.

The council approved the expense, and the revised request for information and qualifications issued in April gave interested parties until July 31 to respond with ideas.

Environmentalists and opponents argued that the request continued to push Henderson's agenda for electricity generation, rather than open the door to less-polluting waste management alternatives.

But Silliman said in an interview Wednesday that the mayor has assembled a committee to work with the consultant and review the responses — and Henderson will not be a part of that process.

"I'm not saying that down the road we won't call him to the table," Silliman said. "That may occur. But this is being driven by the mayor's office — not by CPP. It's broader in scope. We are open to any and all solutions that deal more sustainably with our waste stream. That does not necessarily mean waste-to-energy must be a component."

Silliman said neither he nor the other members of the mayor's committee have seen any of the submissions and will wait until the consulting firm Gershman, Brickner &

Britton has reviewed them first.

The handful of submissions that diverge from gasification systems include ideas for portable recycling machines to process construction and demolition waste, compost sites that harness methane gas to use for energy generation and a recycled-paper mill.

City Councilman Brian Cummins said in an interview Wednesday that he believes the administration is sincere in its desire to find a more sustainable waste management strategy. But he predicted that a large-scale waste-to-energy project will never win approval among residents and council members in Cleveland, where money already is stretched thin.

City administrators have spent too much time, money and effort on consultants and chasing expensive emerging technologies, Cummins said. Hopefully this next phase will address common sense and feasible solutions to reduce waste, increase recyclables and deal environmentally with organic wastes.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter, latassi@plaind.com, 216-999-4549.