

Fact or Fiction? Solid Waste Disposal is a Dirty Job

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The topic of solid waste has been in the news recently, along with terms such as zero waste, flow control and greening the environment. Some of these terms are unfamiliar to a lot of us, and it is not always clear how to accomplish all the objectives being talked about in the field of waste management. The following information will help clarify what's going on with solid waste.

FACT OR FICTION? Solid waste has something to do with sewage.

FICTION: Solid waste is the trash we all throw out. This includes household garbage, yard waste, industrial waste, construction waste, ashes, and household discards such as appliances and furniture.

FACT OR FICTION? The garbage put out at the curb has to go somewhere.

FACT: While you may not think about where your garbage goes, it does not magically disappear. National figures indicate that 4.62 pounds of solid waste per person per day is generated. That's almost 700 tons of garbage being generated every day in Dutchess County. National figures also say that 33% of this garbage is recycled, a figure we are trying to increase for Dutchess County.

FACT OR FICTION? Private haulers take care of all the garbage.

FICTION: The Dutchess County Resource Recovery Agency (DCRRA) provides solid waste management services for the County and oversees a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) for our recyclables and a Waste-to-Energy (WTE) Power Plant for the non-recyclable garbage. Roger Akeley, the Acting Commissioner of Solid Waste Management in Dutchess County, is responsible for the formulation and implementation of a program for the disposal of solid waste. About half of the solid waste (garbage) and half of the recyclables generated in the County are taken to County facilities by local haulers, while the rest goes out-of-county.

FACT OR FICTION? The waste-to-energy plant converts the waste into steam, which is converted to electricity and sold to Central Hudson.

FACT: Many people don't even know there is a Waste-to-Energy plant nearby, which burns the County's solid waste and converts it into energy. What would normally go into a landfill is cleanly and efficiently processed. The plant is one of 87 waste-to-energy plants nationwide, and

one of 10 in New York. It generates about 50,000 megawatts of electricity, enough to supply about 10,000 homes.

FACT OR FICTION? The waste-to-energy plant reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

FACT: According to the Department of Environmental Conservation, stricter emission standards and numerous emission controls being used in all active waste-to-energy facilities in New York State have resulted in a reduction in waste-to-energy air emissions and have significantly contributed to a cleaner state environment. Independent papers authored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), showed that waste-to-energy yielded the best results – maximum energy benefits with the least environmental impact. The plant in Poughkeepsie exceeds standards mandated by the Clear Air Act.



Solid waste being readied for incineration and conversion to steam energy at Dutchess County's waste-to-energy facility.

[Photo Credit: William Conners]

FACT OR FICTION? Solid waste that doesn't go to the waste-to-energy plant goes to landfills in Dutchess County.

FICTION: Dutchess County has closed all of its landfills. As of July 2008, there were 27 active landfills in other NY counties. In 2007, these landfills accepted a total of 8 million tons of solid waste and had 192 million tons of capacity remaining. This equates to approximately 24 years of capacity at 8 million tons per year. Even though current landfills have to ensure adequate protection of groundwater resources and control greenhouse gas emissions, they are of limited capacity and uncertain environmental effects. Dutchess County is one of the few New York counties that does not ship all of its solid waste to landfills.

FACT OR FICTION? We should work toward "zero waste" and eliminate the need for the waste-to-energy plant and landfills altogether.

FACT: It would be great if we could achieve zero waste, where everything is composted, recycled into other products, or reused. This is an important goal and one the County is striving toward, but this goal will not be possible for some time. Let's take a look at why:

- In order to compost all of our food and organic waste, it has to start with the individual. Every person and business in the County would have to compost all food waste. As not everyone has the ability to have a composting area, this would involve a third pick-up (garbage and recyclables are the other two), composting facilities to bring them to, and an entity to manage the facilities.
- In order to recycle at a rate of 100%, every product sold would have to have the ability to be recycled, composted or reused and we would need 100% commitment by everyone to recycle or reuse. Every product bought, from groceries to a fast food hamburger, would have to be in a recyclable container and the organic waste composted. Every supermarket, restaurant, industry and office would have to use only recyclable, compostable or reusable materials. This takes time and commitment, as well as some new technologies for packaging.

- What can not be recycled or composted would have to be reused. Facilities that provide for resale of materials and a market for them would be needed, as well as a way to get the materials to the facility.

The bottom line is that achieving “zero waste” will take time, commitment, and money. It will involve decision-making outside our control. The County is working toward the goal of 100% recycling and reuse, but in the meantime we are studying how best to minimize the County’s financial support of the DCRRA while assuring environmentally sound and low cost solid waste disposal to County residents.

FACT OR FICTION? Since the County has mandated recycling, everyone recycles.

FICTION: A brief survey of co-workers revealed that almost everyone sometimes cheats a little. Maybe it’s the lack of a container for recycling or a little bit of laziness, but we could be doing better. You also might think your office and every business is recycling because there are recycle bins available. Having the containers does not guarantee the materials are being recycled. You have to ensure the recyclables get from the point of generation (i.e. desks, cafeteria) to a storage area and out for pickup by the carting company. It is important that custodial staff knows where containers are for the storage of these materials, and when the carting company will pick them up. If this isn’t specified, the recyclables may be going into the dumpster with the rest of the garbage.



Recyclables being readied...

FACT OR FICTION? The Flow Control Analysis Working Group is studying our waterways.

FICTION: The Flow Control Analysis Working Group (Working Group) is examining the efficacy of re-implementing flow control in Dutchess County. Flow control simply means an entity can control where the solid waste goes. Between 1984 and 1994 Dutchess County exercised flow control, meaning haulers were mandated to bring a set portion of solid waste through the County facilities. This resulted in Dutchess County having to pay only minimal net service fees¹ to the DCRRA. In 1994 a court case ended the ability to continue flow control. Ensuring that enough solid waste came to the County facilities became difficult. Tipping fees² became very competitive. In order for the DCRRA to take in enough solid waste to keep the Waste-to-Energy plant in full operation and generating optimum steam-to-electricity capacity, tipping fees continually have to be adjusted.



...and baled for reuse at the County's Materials Recovery Facility.

[Photo Credits: William Connors]

In 2007 another court case reinstated flow control as an option for governmental entities. In response to this, the Working Group and the DCRRA Board recently contracted with consultants to report on the best way for Dutchess County to handle its solid waste. One alternative being considered is to re-initiate flow control. Right now, a good portion of our waste is taken to other facilities; either other Waste-to-Energy plants or out-of-county landfills. In addition, only five or six haulers use the County facilities, with one hauler accounting for approximately 85% of the waste coming to the County facilities.

FACT OR FICTION? Dutchess County residents pay way too much for solid waste management.

FICTION: Everyone everywhere has to pay to get rid of solid waste. The big difference in Dutchess County is that we convert some of the waste we produce to energy rather than sending all of it to a landfill. In 1980, the County government adopted a policy statement which provided for establishment of a public benefit corporation to manage solid waste, specifically by developing, financing, owning and operating a waste-to-energy facility. The cost to the County to build the facility and ensure it exceeds the Clean Air Act requirements is significant, but the bond to pay for it is also for a limited time period. In addition, it is a cost that allows us to significantly reduce the amount of waste being buried in the ground, and to attain the goal established in the 1980's of handling all solid waste generated in the County at publicly owned facilities. While the cost is also offset somewhat by the conversion of the waste to a clean and sellable product, the generators of solid waste do contribute to the cost of disposal.

Next Steps

Dutchess County is working on updating our Solid Waste Plan, which is now over 20 years old. In preparation, the County is studying the best way to reduce the amount of waste and to increase the amount of recycling and reuse of materials. Some of the main goals to be included in the Plan will be to increase organic composting (both yard and food waste), increase recycling, provide more opportunities for recycling electronics and other hazardous materials, minimize the climate impacts of solid waste management, and find the most “green” and economical way to dispose of the ash produced by the Waste-to-Energy facility.

Notes:

¹The net service fee is the financial support from the County to DCRRA in order to meet its financial obligations, which include the bond payments for the construction costs of the Waste-to-Energy plant and the Clean Air Act compliance upgrades, as well as operating costs.

²The amount haulers pay to “tip” the solid waste off of their trucks at a facility.

More Information

[Dutchess County Resource Recovery Agency](#)
[Dutchess County Dept. of Solid Waste Management](#)

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