

Cleaning up NY's garbage disposal

Finding a cheaper, greener way to get rid of New York's trash.

By Carol Kellermann

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New York City generates more than 25 tons of garbage per minute. That's *14 million tons* per year, and the city's Department of Sanitation spends \$2 billion annually to collect and dispose of about a third of it.

More than \$300 million of that tab goes to railroads, trucking companies and landfill operators to transport and dispose of 3 million tons of nonrecycled garbage, shipped mostly to Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Virginia. This translates to \$95 to ship and bury one ton of garbage—and this price is rising. The most recent contract for exporting garbage by rail sends city garbage more than 650 miles to Virginia, at \$135 per ton.

Exporting garbage is not only expensive, it does enormous environmental harm. The trucks and trains that carry garbage emit greenhouse gases, and the decomposition of garbage in landfills generates methane. Although the city is reducing emissions by rail-hauling more garbage, tractor-trailer trucks still travel 40 million miles to dump city garbage each year. This generates about 679,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases per year—the equivalent of 133,000 cars on the road.

Instead of landfilling, New York City should follow the example of many European countries that convert nonrecyclable garbage into energy. Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland each recycle more than 40% of their garbage and convert about half the rest to energy, while New York City recycles 15% and converts only 9% to energy.

The savings in converting waste to energy would be substantial. The current cost of local waste-to-energy is between \$66 and \$77 per ton, compared with \$95 for long-distance landfilling.

The environmental benefits would be significant, too. Every 14,400 tons of garbage converted to energy is the equivalent of removing 1,000 cars from the road.

The city took a positive step in March by requesting proposals for waste-conversion facilities within 80 miles. But new plants would process a maximum of 900 tons per day, about 5% of landfilled city garbage, and the most mature conversion technology, combustion, is ineligible.

Greater savings would be achieved by allowing larger new plants and partnering with existing local ones. Thirty-three facilities operate in New York and adjacent states, and the city should explore their ability to receive additional garbage, either as currently configured or through expansion.

Locating a plant within city borders poses significant hurdles, but other cities, including Paris and Copenhagen, have recently designed plants that fit into the urban landscape. New York City's legacy of waste incineration also hinders development, but air emissions from modern plants bear no resemblance to 1960s-era incinerators and meet strict federal and state regulations.

If local waste-to-energy facilities processed 2 million more tons of city waste, New Yorkers would save \$119 million annually and \$2 billion over 30 years. The reduction in annual greenhouse-gas emissions would be 35%—the equivalent of eliminating all vehicle traffic through the Holland Tunnel.

These are major savings and environmental improvements. New York City should not miss out on them.

The author is president of the Citizens Budget Commission.