

The State perspective

By Randy Seaver
Editor

While most everyone agrees a trash incinerator should not be located in the middle of a downtown area that is hoping for an economic rebirth, opinions remain greatly divided about how to get the Maine Energy Recovery Company out of downtown Biddeford.

But can the state of Maine, which is already saddled with its own plethora of fiscal nightmares, lend a helping hand to MERC's so-called "host communities" of Biddeford and Saco?

That will be the topic of discussion when area legislators meet next month with representatives from Twin Cities Renaissance, a grassroots group that formed five years ago to facilitate the eventual closure of the MERC plant.

Also scheduled to attend that meeting are representatives of Maine's Congressional delegation, which includes Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins and Congressman Tom Allen.

"We firmly believe that our local senators and representatives will play a crucial role in removing MERC's blight from our downtowns," said Mike Eon, TCR's spokesperson. "We're under no illusions. This effort will require imagination and commitment over several years."

But a community led buyout of the MERC plant would likely come attached with a big price tag, estimated to be as much as \$40 million to buy the plant — not to mention the loss of Biddeford's largest taxpayer, roughly 85 jobs, increased trash disposal costs and the necessity of building a transfer station for local trash sorting.

Furthermore, closing the plant would only put more of a squeeze on a state that is already facing lower than expected recycling rates and a looming solid waste crisis.

"The issues here are much broader than just local concerns," said Sam Zaitlin, a consultant to Casella Waste and former Saco mayor. "We could close all the solid waste facilities but we'd still be left with the problem of what to do with the trash we create."

And even those who are eager to see MERC shut down concede the process will likely not get a financial boost from a state that is now facing significant budget deficits.

A conflict with state policies

Closing MERC, lawmakers say, would also involve revamping the state's current solid waste policy, which now includes incineration as a key component.

"Unfortunately, we've put all our eggs in one basket," said State Rep. Joanne Twomey (D-Biddeford). "I've been saying it for years, our state policies on trash are horrible, but we seem to be locked into this idea that incineration is a good thing. It's so frustrating."

Twomey, a member of the Natural Resources Committee, is not new to the MERC debate. A former Biddeford city councilor, she was one of the most outspoken critics of the plant even before it opened in the early 1980s.

Shortly after MERC began accepting trash in the mid 1980s, Twom-



MARK ROBINSON — a longtime member of Twin Cities Renaissance — says MERC's continued presence in the downtown area is significantly dampening possible redevelopment and investment in both Biddeford and Saco.

ey collected ash samples that routinely spewed from the plant's main ventilation stack. Those samples were instrumental, she says, in heavy fines against the company and an out-of-court settlement to the two cities.

As one of the area's senior state representatives (she was elected to her first House term in 1998) Twomey has introduced several bills that were targeted at incinerator companies. And she resigned her city council seat when former Biddeford mayor James Grattelo pulled the funding for a health study intended to examine MERC's possible effects upon community health issues.

But despite all that, Twomey seemed somewhat despondent when asked about the upcoming meeting with other legislators and state and federal officials, citing Casella's lobbying influence in Augusta and a deal that would allow the company to operate a new state-owned landfill in West Old Town.

"I'm just being realistic," Twomey said. "I just don't see anything big happening, not with the way things are going right now. I doubt that we have the political will in either Augusta or Biddeford to make any big changes."

Twomey said she is discouraged but remains hopeful that MERC can eventually be closed.

"I'm glad that TCR is making the effort," she said. "But there is a part of me that says we've been here before and done that. People like Mike Eon used to look at me like I had two heads when I was pushing to get a health study. But it doesn't matter. I'm willing to work with anyone to achieve the goal."

One man's trash, another man's treasure

Eon said TCR representatives designed the March 9 event to be a brainstorming session, "to put some ideas on the table."

"Biddeford and Saco have done far more than our share in the last 20 years to take care of 500 million pounds of garbage, every year, for other Maine towns and the northeast United States," he said. "In return, the financial burden of closing MERC should be kept to a minimum for the taxpayers of Biddeford and Saco. We've already paid dearly enough."

But State Sen. Barry Hobbins (D-Saco) said he doubts that much — if any — money will be available to Biddeford and Saco for help with closing the plant.

"What's a priority for Biddeford and Saco is not necessarily a priority for Madawaska, Caribou or Kittery," Hobbins said. "I think it's great that people are willing to look for practical solutions, and I think this meeting can, at the very least, lay the groundwork for a global solution."

Mixed signals to Augusta?

Hobbins is hoping the March 9 meeting will be productive and provide the impetus for long-range discussions about Maine's solid waste alternatives.

He also said TCR's meetings with former Gov. Angus King in 2002 helped the state realize that both Biddeford and Saco have serious concerns about their ability to revitalize their economy while also hosting a regional waste incinerator in the downtown area.

"Those meetings really got Angus [King] off the dime," Hobbins said. "I think the state is much more willing to help when it can be assured that the two communities are willing to work together."

After being approached by TCR, King offered his assistance to the two communities to help negotiate a settlement between them and the company.

But that offer was rebuffed by the cities' former mayors, who both cited an upcoming gubernatorial election, their ongoing lawsuits against the company and King's close, personal relationship with Zaitlin as factors in their decisions to refuse state assistance then.

The cities' refusal to accept state assistance three years ago frustrated TCR's members and the watchdog group faded from the public spotlight in order to regroup and assess their strategy.

Today, TCR members say their organization is once again picking up momentum and encouraged about a new crop of local elected officials who have expressed a willingness to work cooperatively toward a solution.

"Closing MERC will help turn Biddeford-Saco into one of Maine's most dynamic economic engines, and eventually that will pay huge dividends in jobs and economic expansion," Eon said. "State and fed-

eral officials could give this important economic development project a big push.”

Hobbins said he is impressed by TCR’s tenacity and hopes they and others who want the plant closed will continue to work in a cooperative fashion and not grow impatient with the sometimes snail pace of state and federal government bureaucracy.

“I don’t think this meeting is going to offer a silver bullet solution, but I do think it could be an exciting opportunity to lay the proper foundation for what could benefit everyone involved,” he said. “This is a state issue, and it will likely require us to begin looking at other sites. The only problem with that is no one wants a landfill in their back yard.”

The new guys speak out

Because of Maine’s legislative term limits law, a majority of the tri-community area’s legislative delegation are freshman members of their respective chambers.

Both of Saco’s state representatives, for example, were elected in November and are just now learning the ropes of the legislative process. They both say they are hoping to learn more about the MERC issue by attending the March 9 meeting.

“I view this as a chance to get up to speed on a very critical issue for our community,” said State Rep. Don Pilon, who represents the eastern part of the city. “I haven’t really been in the loop on MERC, and I’m curious to see what I can do to help.”

State Rep. Linda Valentino, said she also has a lot to learn about the issues surrounding the MERC plant. “I’m going with an open mind,” she said. “In a perfect world, I’d like to see it closed, but then we have to ask ourselves what we will do with our trash.”

Chris O’Neil, a former state representative who held Valentino’s seat in the Legislature for eight years, is scheduled to serve as the event’s moderator.

“The timing for this is great,” O’Neil said. “It’s a good place to start, and it’s good that people are recognizing this is a state issue, which goes well beyond Biddeford and Saco.”

O’Neil said he planned to attend the meeting even before being asked to serve as its moderator.

“This represents a great public policy challenge,” he said. “We’re not the only community that has solid waste problems. What we need to ask ourselves now is what we’re willing to pay to make it happen and more importantly, what will the alternative be once you close the plant.”