

Meet the opposition

By Ward Peck
Staff Writer

Founded in 2000, Twin Cities Renaissance's mission is to, "secure the removal of the MERC incinerator from downtown Biddeford-Saco. We encourage good-faith dialog between local state and federal officials as they seek responsible alternatives for solid waste management in a post-MERC era."

According to many people familiar with the long-running MERC debate, a resolution has never been as close as it is now.

Last Wednesday, TCR sought to accomplish one of its mission, a dialog between local, state and federal officials, by hosting a forum to discuss all things MERC at the Saco Holiday Inn Express.

"I'm totally frustrated TCR had to put that meeting together," said Mark Robinson, a leading voice in the organization. Robinson said the frustration stems from a lack of leadership by the two cities' elected officials. He conceded that those officials are hamstrung by the need to keep on-going negotiations productive and confidential, but those negotiations should not preclude public involvement.

While the organization does not release its membership rolls, Robinson said the group maintains an e-mail list of more than 1,000 people interested in closing the plant.

"The turn out at the meeting was a fraction of the members," Robinson said. Both he and Mike Eon, TCR's president, said participation was higher than expected, especially considering the weather.

Robinson estimated 150 people showed up on a cold night after a major snowstorm, roughly in line with the Courier's estimate. "It's a huge network, stretching from Augusta to Hawaii," he said.

The membership of TCR is unified in its desire to see the incinerator closed, Eon said. Opinions vary on exactly how that should be accomplished, including the financial obligations required by the host cities and the environmental responsibilities of the incinerator's owner, Casella Waste Systems of Rutland, Vt., before and after operations cease.

"TCR is not a monolith. Different members have different concerns," Eon said.

Speaking for himself, Eon said one of his major concerns are the health and environmental effects of the facility. He notes that the facility is only required to test for some of the most toxic and noxious emissions once a year, at a time chosen by the operators. Eon calls for continuous emissions monitoring for compounds such as mercury. He notes that such testing is already within Biddeford's contractual power.

"Biddeford is able to install any emissions testing equipment it chooses, right now. They may have to pay for the equipment, but it's within their power."

While both Robinson and Eon hold out hope the facility is closed earlier, they agree that the plant will not be shut down until after 2012, when the plant's power contract with Central Maine power expires.

"Even if the deal stipulates the incinerator will shut down in 2012, I'd still want stronger emissions testing," Eon said.

Asked if TCR would be satisfied if continuous emissions testing was instituted tomorrow and showed the plant operated cleanly, both Eon and Robinson said it might satisfy some members, but not all.

"It would take a little wind out of our sails," Robinson said.

"I'd be less concerned," Eon said. "But even if it is found to run squeaky clean I'd want it closed, because it is a blight and a drag on the economic development."

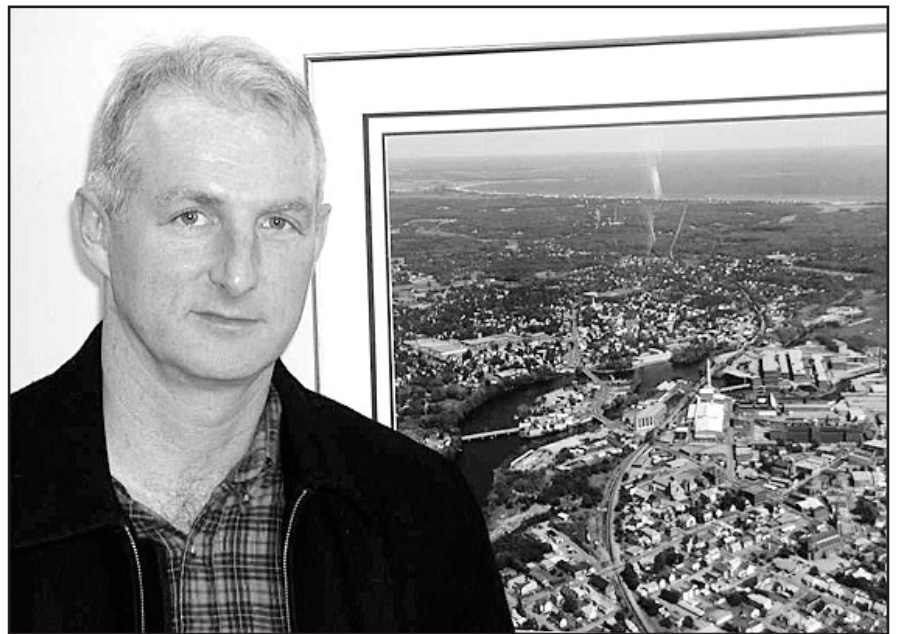
At its meeting on Wednesday night, many participants spoke about how the incinerator was sold as a solution to the area's economic problems. State Rep. Linda Valentino, who was a Saco city councilor when the plant was being sited, spoke of how Biddeford "stole" MERC from Saco.

Asked if TCR was engaging in similar rhetoric, selling the closure of the plant as the answer to the area's problems, Robinson said, "I think that's a very unsophisticated analysis. That's not what we're saying. Removing MERC is not a panacea, but it's presence is an obstacle."

"There was a development boom in the late 1980s and one in the mid-1990s. We missed both. Are we prepared to miss the next one?" Eon asked. "Is Biddeford going to survive if MERC remains? It has survived the last 30 years and it will survive the next 30, but it will remain depressed."

"We don't underestimate the process. This is for long-term thinkers. If you are concerned about next year's mil rate, you're not going to like the answers," Eon said.

On Thursday and Friday of last week, the negotiators from Biddeford, Saco and Casella sat down to finalize a draft agreement, while



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.

not everything has been finalized, the parties are close to consensus, said Biddeford City Manager Ed Clifford.

Asked about their feelings about the cities' strategy of negotiation over coercion with Casella, both Eon and Robinson agreed it was the right tactic.

"The one thing that has changed is Casella is willing to talk," Eon said.

"They are a lawfully operating business. They are in compliance," Robinson said.

While agreeing with the overall strategy, they did take issue with some of the specific tactics employed by the cities.

"The cities have chosen not to use their odor protocol," Eon said. He was referring to the odor complaint protocol that has resulted in over a thousand complaints but only a handful of fines.

While theorizing what the agreement may or may not include, Robinson noted a long-standing commitment to allow the public to comment and amend any agreement reached by the negotiating team.

"[Biddeford City Councilor] Ken Farley says any agreement will be presented as a draft for public comment."

Eon said TCR will review that draft to ensure it protects public health and the environment as much as possible.

"They know what we are asking for and that we will be looking for it in any agreement," Eon said.

When asked for a worst case scenario of what the agreement may entail, Eon said, "A new contract giving away the city's current power to impose any monitoring and it operates for another 20 years."

For TCR the best case scenario, aside from immediate closure is an agreement to cease operations by 2012, and the costs to close the facility is shared by not only the state and federal governments to share the costs, but the surrounding communities as well.

"These two communities bear the brunt of the costs and the rest of the surrounding communities reap the benefits. The best case is all communities share the cost of closure," Robinson said.

Asked of the most likely scenario, Robinson said, "I think the cities are seriously considering a buy-out option. If that's the case it is all-important to involve city and state officials."

Another scenario put to the two men was the possibility that Casella is planning to close the plant in the near future anyway, and the will have negotiated the purchase of a white elephant.

"It is my impression of the negotiations that Biddeford is hoping Casella will close the plant on its own," Robinson said. "We can't cross our fingers and just hope they will close it."

Both Robinson and Eon believe it is important for negotiations to be resolved sooner or later.

"November is coming and that has been a challenge. The faces on MERC's side of the table have remained constant, but on the other side of the table, the players change every two years," Robinson noted, referring to both cities' upcoming mayoral and city council elections.

"I've received reports that a certain councilor dismisses TCR as a special interest group. It is a large group. The same names do all the talking, but people would be surprised to learn who is on our email list," Robinson said.