

DUMPS ARE NOT THE ANSWER

Comments Presented to Marin County's "Counting Down to Zero Waste Workshop"
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I. Introduction

I am honored tonight to share the panel with a number of distinguished experts. Along with all of you I hope to learn much from them and walk away with specific next steps and clear direction to establish Marin County's Zero Waste Goals, Strategies, Programs, and Policies.

Tonight is an important step in redirecting Marin County's future - away from an unwise dependency on the trash industry based on the false notion of "waste management," and toward sustainability and resource conservation.

I'm here tonight not as a professional environmentalist or technical expert, but as a member of the Marin community who sees us at a crossroads, with a clear choice at hand.

II. "Ground Zero" and the Redwood Landfill Dump's Proposed Expansion

Marin County truly is at "ground zero" in a struggle that pits the current garbage paradigm and its chief ally - what I call "uninformed complacency"- against the enlightened set of principles and strategies we call "Zero Waste."

We hear a lot about the 3 "Rs" when it comes to Zero Waste: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Sometimes we hear about a 4th - "Rot" - which represents strategies for composting and keeping organic material out of a landfill where it doesn't belong.

In addition, what we need to focus on tonight is a 5th "R" for "**Rethink.**" Without rethinking the standard assumptions and limitations the garbage industry has imposed on us, we won't get very far with Zero Waste as an alternative to garbage dump business-as-usual with its threats to the environment and human health.

The catalyst pushing us to a crossroads in Marin is the plan to expand the Redwood Landfill. Waste Management Inc., ("WMI") the multinational garbage conglomerate owns the Redwood "Sanitary Landfill," a laundered euphemism for the dump. It has applied to Marin Environmental Health Services to turn its man-made 40 foot tall local dump on top of Marin's northeastern wetlands into a regional dump by expanding permitted volume by 80%. The garbage mountain would reach 166 feet into the sky and be a permanent blight on the Petaluma Marsh and River valley landscape.

A dump is a horrible loss of resources. It is a destructive way to deal with unwanted or

used goods and materials. And with the Roman Empire technology of a dump, you don't even know what exactly is lost. At the Redwood Dump, 99% of the trucks are not inspected, the dumping is largely unsupervised, and within a few hours the materials are literally covered-up with no chance of extraction.

There are 5 key points about the proposed dump expansion plan everyone should keep in mind:

1. **Who Benefits.** Virtually all of the expanded volume would be filled by large long-haul garbage trucks coming from outside of Marin, as WMI admits that its goal is to capture out-of-county revenues.
2. **False Urgency.** There is no urgency to approve expansion, as under the current permit we still have at least 18 years of capacity in-county, and plenty of options outside the county.
3. **Horrific Location.** The dump is built on old sloughs against the largest tidal marsh in California leading to the Petaluma River and San Pablo Bay; it rests below sea-level, is no more than 2 feet above groundwater in places, has no liner, is 10 feet away from San Antonio Creek, and is in a floodplain between two major earthquake faults.
4. **Negative Impact on Human Health.** The compound effects of increased toxic diesel-spewing truck traffic, methane gas combustion, and combined emissions of reactive organic gas, oxides of nitrogen, and other emissions would result in unavoidable negative impacts on air quality and human health.
5. **Dangerous Design.** The FEIR states that in the event of a 7.0 earthquake considerable structural damage would likely occur to the 166 foot tall mountain of garbage – after all, it's built on Bay Mud and we all know about shaking and liquefaction; and the only thing separating the heaps of garbage from the wetlands or rising water from the heaps of garbage is an old levee originally built to contain a dump a fraction of the propose size.

Here's the kicker: neither the dump's design nor the FEIR considers the impact of global warming. This is shocking, given the dump's below sea-level elevation and location in a wetlands setting. Even a two-foot rise in sea-level over the next 50 years (a conservative estimate) could have a disastrous impact.

NWLE's two extensive comment letters and submissions by independent experts document these points in great detail. See www.noexpansion.org.

III. The Myth of “Mitigation,” and the Dump as a Giant Greenhouse Gas Machine

The version of the so-called “mitigated alternative” to the original expansion plan that WMI will accept does not address these issues. In fact, the fallacy of “mitigating” this huge dump is pointed out by one head-scratching element that even some environmentalists are

grasping at: the notion of energy development at the dump.

The Redwood Dump, like all others, is a giant greenhouse gas machine. Approximately 60% of what is put into a dump is organic. Decomposing organic matter produces methane, a greenhouse gas with 21 times more global warming potential than carbon dioxide. Methane also transports hazardous compounds such as benzene and other suspected carcinogens into the atmosphere. Dumps' contribution to climate change might be 10% or more, by some estimates.

The mitigated alternative would enable construction of a methane gas conversion plant (which by the way would require its own EIR). In a terrific public relations effort, WMI is beginning to trumpet this so-called "green energy" benefit of its dumps around the country.

This "green energy" is an oxymoron if there ever was one. What WMI and others who would profit from this scheme don't reveal is that landfill methane gas recovery likely only captures 10% of the harmful gas that is generated by the heaps of garbage - and only through a dangerous process. Vacuum pressure must be kept low to avoid explosions.

Let's take a step back and rethink. Managing decomposable material in the ground is a ludicrous way to save energy resources. Why would we fill-up a man-made mountain with biodegradable materials in order to inefficiently capture a fraction of the harmful methane gas by-product?

Environmental efforts ought to be aimed at efficiently keeping organic materials out of the dump in the first place. Choosing landfill expansion with the fig leaf of methane gas recovery over serious Zero Waste policies and programs would further drive climate change which in turn could result in a catastrophic event at Marin's wetlands dump.

Expansion of this dump is not the answer to any problem Marin County has today. It will only create more problems for us in the future. And it will allow other communities, who would export their waste problems to Marin, off the hook.

IV. Rethinking Alternatives to Landfill Expansion

I mentioned "uninformed complacency" as the chief ally of the garbage paradigm. This ally is hard at work, and WMI has been counting on it and courting it. Uninformed complacency is reflected in the question: "We have to put our waste somewhere, don't we?"

Up until recently, WMI has been trying to supply the only answer to that question. Then a group of citizens roused themselves from uninformed complacency and started asking harder questions. This has led to a coalition of more established environmental and community groups including the Sierra Club, Sustainable Marin, Sustainable Novato, the Central Democratic Committee of Marin, and the Novato Democratic Club to oppose expansion and ask the County to devise alternatives to so-called "waste management." That's why we're here this evening.

Dump expansion is a simplistic, short-term complacent answer to the question of where

should we put our waste. Even if you assume that is the right question to ask, as with real estate, location greatly matters. And building a mountain of garbage on wetlands to accommodate one corporation's thirst for profits is not in the public's interest. Moreover, it is not even asking the right question.

Instead, here are three "rethink questions" we need to ask and answer:

1. Why are we creating so much waste, and how can we minimize it?
2. Are government policies and programs contributing to wasteful practices?
3. With a Zero Waste Plan, Policies, and Strategy, do we really need a regional dump in Marin County in 20 years?

V. Marin County's Role with Respect to Current Wasteful Practices

A. Subsidization of the Dump

As Paul Palmer points out in his book, Getting to Zero Waste, government policies essentially subsidize the garbage industry. And that is true with respect to the Redwood Dump in Marin County. Taken together, these subsidies allow WMI to undercut surrounding landfill tipping fees. We need to rethink.

There are 4 ways our government is effectively subsidizing the Redwood Dump:

1. Accepting WMI's unsubstantiated argument that it must expand and become a regional dump or it can't afford to keep Redwood open - assuring WMI its profits. In Novato last fall, then Mayor Bernie Meyers challenged WMI on this very point, en route to Novato adopting a strong resolution opposing expansion.
2. Allowing WMI to do here what mega-landfills are doing across the country: expand upward to avoid costs of lateral expansion including the need to meet modern landfill standards such as 5 foot separation from groundwater and installing a liner.
3. Accepting long-term liability for the ecological mess that is a virtual certainty to happen in the future. According to the EPA, all dumps will leak. Unlike most dumps, the Redwood Dump is built on wetlands in a floodplain and active earthquake zone. WMI is only responsible for 30 years post-closure. In fact, rational corporate behavior means that WMI is only trying to design the dump in terms of safety to last those 30 years. After that, it's our grandkids' problem.
4. Most importantly, allowing the dump to operate under a one-page 1958 land use permit. The local land use permit is supposed to provide broader protection underneath the state's solid waste facility permit. Ours does not. WMI is therefore allowed to operate without the additional expense of compliance.

Essentially, the county is trusting WMI to supervise itself instead of having it pay for independent supervision. As a recent 30-page white paper commissioned by No Wetlands Landfill Expansion and available on our website exhaustively points out, that trust is misplaced given that WMI's way of doing business includes a callous disregard of environmental standards. This is evident by the over \$20 million in fines and another \$60 million in assumed or shared liability for landfill clean-ups across the country in the last five years alone. In the very least Marin County needs an independent monitor reporting to a Community Monitor Committee, as Alameda County has for the Altamont Landfill.

B. Marin County's Diversion Rate

"Diversion" is a subset of garbage management. As Paul Palmer has pointed out, it presumes complacency, a flowing river of waste where some subset of damaged materials is plucked-out at the end. It is an add-on to garbage collection and is controlled by the waste industry which has no economic incentive to move from the current paradigm.

Marin County's diversion rate shows both the potential of, and the need for, doing more to reduce, reuse, recycle, and properly "rot" organics within a Zero Waste Plan and outside of the dump.

The County recently announced its attainment of a 77% diversion rate for 2004, well above the state requirement and state average. But that is only 1% higher than 2003. It seems we've reached a plateau. And what has this diversion rate actually done for Marin and the environment?

Here are three sets of "rethink questions" we need to ask and answer about diversion rates:

1. Diversion is measured according to gross weight of materials. Does this really matter? What resources are actually conserved as the result of our diversion efforts?
2. What actually happens with our recyclables? For example, due to Marin's relative wealth and landscape, a large portion of diverted materials is yard waste. Where does that yard waste go? Much of it goes into the dump, believe it or not, as a daily top layer called "alternative daily cover." This actually compounds the methane gas problem I noted earlier and fails to turn organic material into compost and a valuable soil amendment.
3. Why do we have to mix, break, and crush materials through our current process of recycling instead of preserving them? This is a great question that Paul Palmer asks. Today we are actually down-cycling: moving materials from a higher function to a lower, with the waste in resources that entails. Can recycling and diversion be built at the front end, instead of the wasteful

back-end? Can we recycle functions instead of broken and torn bits and pieces? Now that we have met the state's modest and questionable diversion goal, let's rethink diversion and recycling practices in Marin County and adopt a greener standard.

VI. Conclusion: Where do we go from Here?

I mentioned at the outset that Marin is at a crossroads. In fact, there are 3 parallel paths that must intersect at this crossroads now:

1. The Zero Waste initiative which must gain traction as a result of this workshop and be informed by experts such as Gary Liss, Paul Palmer, Linda Christopher, and others here tonight.
2. Finalization of the revised Countywide Plan with its overall inspirational themes of sustainability, but seems to accept Redwood Dump's expansion as a given, says nothing about Zero Waste goals and policies, and inexplicably sets a 75% diversion rate goal by 2015, a goal we've already attained and don't quite know what it means anyway.
3. Review of the scope and conditions of the Redwood Dump's land use permit as allowed under state law. With the support of a legal opinion, No Wetlands Landfill Expansion, the Sierra Club, Sustainable Novato and Marin, the Central Democratic Committee of Marin, the Novato Democratic Club, Madrone Audubon, and Bay Keeper have petitioned the Board of Supervisors to do just that. This needs to happen now, while holding the line in the solid waste facility permit proceeding and requiring a complete FEIR that answers all of the hard questions given the dump's unfortunate location on our northeastern wetlands.

This workshop is important, because members of the public, not just those who benefit from the current garbage paradigm, need the chance to play a meaningful role in rethinking better ways to reduce and recycle used materials. We need to come out of here tonight with specific next steps with clear accountabilities at the local and county level, with government, citizens, and businesses working together. I want to thank Supervisor McGlashan and the organizers of this event for the chance to participate, and I look forward to answering any questions.