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PD EDITORIAL: Funding dump

Future of landfill should hinge on limiting waste -- of money



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Trash is transferred at a Mecham Road facility into big-rig containers for export to dumps in other counties.

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What do you get when you mix a finite supply of garbage with a seemingly infinite supply of government mandates — and public desires — for handling trash and protecting the environment?

You get the current debate surrounding the future of the Sonoma County landfill on Mecham Road.

The landfill has been closed for commercial purposes since 2005 when Regional Water Quality Control Board officials found landfill contaminants seeping into areas outside of the dump.

Given that, county officials have been exploring the idea of turning over its trash-compacting operations to a private company. But not too many people are crazy about that idea, as evidenced by the turnout and testimony at a forum in Santa Rosa on Monday.

Given the realities of government regulation, local soil quality and NIMBYism, finding another site to dump garbage in Sonoma County is a pipe dream. This essentially leaves the county with three choices: fix the landfill, lease it — which essentially means to sell it — or do nothing and maintain the status quo.

All concerned should agree that the third option is the least attractive. At the moment, Sonoma County is exporting its garbage to other counties at a rate of 65 trash-truck trips a day, meaning the county is likely causing more environmental damage while retaining less control over dumping costs. The fact that we lack the wherewithal to take care of our own waste should be a great source of local embarrassment.

As for the second option, county officials say that fixing the landfill would cost about \$70 million. For that amount, the county could widen Highway 101 from Wilfred Avenue to Rohnert Park Expressway, build a new interchange, reunite Santa Rosa's Courthouse Square and have money left over to help a few local school districts balance their budgets this year.

Those, including some speakers Monday, who argue that this number is inflated could be correct. But they have yet to make their case. The fact is nobody knows for certain what the cost will be until the county commits to fixing the problem and seeking the permits it needs to reopen the landfill. Cost estimates for these kinds of projects rarely turn out to be on the low side.

Some pin their hopes on the county creating a materials recovery facility, which they claim would process 90 percent of all trash. But this, too, would require a major investment of public money — at a time when such funds are in short supply — with uncertain outcomes.

So why would a private company have better luck working with state regulators and fixing the landfill than the county would?

This is the \$64,000 — or million — question. The answer is somewhere in the details of discussions now being held behind closed doors between the county and private contractors. Much will depend on what commitments the county — and by extension all the cities — would make to a possible bidder.

As this week's forum indicates, county officials still have a lot of work to do in selling this idea to the public, persuading residents that leasing the landfill to a private contractor is the best outcome for county residents, the environment and the county's budget.

As Winston Churchill once said about democracy, this may be the worst possible alternative, except for all the others.