

Frank Hornstein, Jean Wagenius: Star Tribune wrong to endorse plan to increase incinerator use

Minneapolis City Council should reject Hennepin County's proposal.

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Opinion

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The Star Tribune's July 18 editorial, "Burning is part of a larger plan," widely misses the mark on Hennepin County's proposal to significantly increase incineration of garbage next to the new Twins stadium. In the rush to burn, with recycling and composting as an afterthought, there are significant unanswered questions about the public health and environmental impact of this major expansion.

Details of the "plan" are sketchy. And after three months of promoting its incinerator expansion, Hennepin County is only now at a very preliminary stage of even discussing increasing recycling and composting -- both better alternatives to manage solid waste. Hennepin County's new recycling ideas will not get their first hearing until Aug. 4, and details will not be ready for a full public vetting until at least December.

The move to expand incineration will only exacerbate Hennepin County's mismanagement of solid waste over the last two decades. When the incinerator opened in 1989, half of its waste stream consisted of newspaper, office paper, cardboard, food waste and other materials that can readily be recycled and composted. That figure remains essentially the same today, while Hennepin's rate of recycling has not significantly increased over the lifetime of the garbage burner. Citizen-initiated efforts in southwest Minneapolis to separate and collect compostable materials, particularly food waste, have been very successful. The pilot project demonstrates that the public will embrace and participate in new ways to manage waste. The county should work to implement those alternatives first, rather than seek city and state permission for a 20 percent increase in burning.

The Star Tribune paid mere lip service to the burner expansion's health impacts on city residents. Hennepin County wants to move forward with its burning plan based on the environmental impact statement for the Twins' stadium. But that study only looked at the health impact for season-ticket holders and players, who are at the ballpark for short periods of time. Minneapolis residents and others around the region will

face daily, around-the-clock exposures to the burner's increased toxic air emissions. The Target Field environmental analysis also failed to include how increased burner emissions will add to the region's already deteriorating air quality.

Further, there is no information on the proposal's impact on global warming. State studies clearly show that the best way to address global warming in solid waste management is to increase recycling and composting and reduce disposal in incinerators and landfills. It makes no sense to continue to burn recyclables, while producing toxic air emissions, incinerator ash, and increasing climate change gases. The ash, which amounts to a whopping 25 percent of what enters the burner, can be hazardous and is currently sent to landfills outside the county and state. The Star Tribune suggests that the Minneapolis City Council defer to the Pawlenty administration's Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) on these key health and environmental issues. Yet the governor has shown little interest in directing his environmental agency to hold polluters accountable by issuing up-to-date and tougher permits. In fact, the MPCA is so ineffective that it allowed the current Hennepin burner permit to expire six years ago.

The county's burner plan is not ready for prime-time, and the City Council should follow the lead of the Minneapolis Planning Commission and deny the burner expansion request. Hennepin County erred when it made a decision about public health with data that was both inappropriate and inadequate.

Similarly, Minneapolis should not leave this decision exclusively to the Pawlenty administration, which is likely to rubber stamp the county burner expansion. No public entity -- particularly the City Council, which is charged with protecting the health and well-being of its residents -- should be asked to make a decision of this magnitude based on incomplete and misleading environmental information.

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