

Waste agencies consider consolidation

County explores ways for North County garbage to end up in Marina landfill

December 20, 2011

Monterey Herald By LARRY PARSONS

Monterey County has two public agencies in the solid-waste business.

Monterey County supervisors are asking if that's one agency too many.

Late last month, Supervisor Jane Parker, chairwoman of the Board of Supervisors, wrote both agencies saying it was time for more cooperation, partnership and collaboration between the two.

"We believe that, ultimately, a single solid waste agency would be in the best interest of the residents and businesses of Monterey County," Parker wrote.

The Monterey Regional Waste Management District, which handles solid waste in the county's coastal territories, was formed in 1951 and operates a 315-acre landfill in Marina. The district is overseen by a nine-member board with county and Peninsula city representatives.

The Salinas Solid Waste Authority was formed in 1997 to take over solid-waste activities from the county and city of Salinas, which had several now-closed landfills in North and South County. The agency, which is overseen by county and Salinas Valley city representatives, now disposes of unrecycled waste in the Johnson Canyon landfill near Gonzales.

In a controversial recent move, the Salinas Valley agency approved moving ahead on a waste-conversion plant at Johnson Canyon to sharply reduce the amount of waste being buried there. The agency is working with Plasco Energy Group of Canada to prepare an environmental impact report on a plant that would use plasma technology to convert garbage to energy. Some Gonzales residents and environmentalist claim the technology is unproven and the plant would pose a health threat.

But it was something less esoteric that prompted the supervisors' questions about the efficacy of two solid-waste agencies.

Some of North County's trash goes to the Marina landfill, but most of the area is within the Salinas Valley district and its trash ultimately winds up in Johnson Canyon.

"It just seemed strange," Parker said Monday.

So the county began looking at ways for all of North County's garbage to take the shorter disposal route to Marina.

"One of those options would be for the county to withdraw from the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority," Parker said.

That calls into question the overall wisdom of having two solid-waste agencies. There have been ongoing discussions among the county and the two agencies about ways to work more closely, "but it hasn't really coalesced into concrete steps that actually would create some efficiencies," Parker said.

William Merry, general manager of the Monterey Regional agency, said he met Monday with R. Patrick Mathews, his counterpart at the Salinas Valley agency. He said there have been ongoing talks about ways to team together, and "we will be meeting regularly."

Merry said the letter from the supervisors "raises the bar a little bit."

He said there "could be some opportunities to increase efficiencies" with a single countywide system.

He said the recession has reduced the Peninsula agency's waste stream by 30 percent over the past five years, and that has cut sharply into revenues.

That's another reason to look at "opportunities to work more closely," he said.

Parker was careful to say that the supervisors don't call the shots for either of the solid-waste agencies.

"We're just suggesting we'd like to see things move in that direction. It would seem to make sense," she said.

Mathews didn't return a phone message. But in his reply to Parker's Nov. 21 letter, he said "conjoined operations" with the Peninsula agency is one of three long-range options for Salinas Valley services. The other two are the status quo and privatization.

Moreover, Mathews said both agencies have discussed combining public education programs next year.

"We look forward to ongoing discussions between both agencies on areas of mutual cooperation," Mathews wrote.

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