

## Recycling Bill

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PANAMA CITY &mdash; A bill making its way through the state Senate that mandates increased recycling could have caused major problems for Bay County's waste-to-energy incinerator. A lobbying effort by a county official and help from State Rep. Jimmy Patronis, R-Panama City, earlier this week averted the county's problem, but brought attention to the fact that Bay's preferred method of recycling is not popular in environmental circles.

Senate Bill 570, sponsored by Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, would require all public entities and certain private companies to recycle more. The bill, as originally written, would require counties that use incinerators to recycle half of the trash they currently burn.

Waste-to-energy incinerators burn garbage to produce electricity, and the ash created takes up substantially less space than the trash going in; saving room in landfills (ash takes up 80 to 90 percent less space, and weighs 50 to 60 percent less than the refuse burned to make it).

Some environmental rights groups question the merits of incinerators, though, because of carbon dioxide emissions. In the renewable energy world, waste-to-energy incineration isn't considered the greenest of green technologies, and Constantine's bill reflected this.

"We don't have a problem with waste-to-energy, we just don't want them, if they can avoid it, to eliminate recyclables that can be renewed," Constantine said.

The recycling mandate, however, would have created a refuse shortfall for Bay County's incinerator.

"We wouldn't have had enough trash to burn efficiently," said Joe Tannehill Jr., managing partner of EnGen LLC, the company that manages the incinerator's garbage supply in half would

have created two problems, according to Tannehill &mdash; it would have damaged the incinerator machinery and threatened the county&rsquo;s ability to pay off debt service.

When EnGen took over incinerator operations from Montenay Bay in September 2007 the incinerator didn&rsquo;t have a steady flow of garbage fuel to keep it burning 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

&ldquo;A plant like that is designed to run all the time ... you can&rsquo;t just run a few days and be idle a few days,&rdquo; Tannehill said Thursday. &ldquo;It causes failures in the plant to start it up and shut it down often.&rdquo;

The incinerator burns about 150,000 tons of trash per year, according to Tannehill, but slicing that to 75,000 tons would have caused stoppages.

More important to the county finances, cutting the garbage supply would have caused a reduction in energy produced. The incinerator makes about \$2.5 million to \$3 million each year by selling its electricity (Gulf Power is a customer), a number that would have been hit hard by a 50 percent cut in garbage fuel. The county owes \$3.2 million in debt service on the incinerator yearly, and its ability to pay that number could have been hindered by SB 570.

With that in mind, County Public Information Officer Valerie Lovett traveled to Tallahassee on Monday to meet with Constantine&rsquo;s staff and pleaded the county&rsquo;s case. She found a willing partner in Patronis, who helped convince Constantine to amend the bill.

&ldquo;He had come up with a bill that has good intentions, but even good intentions have expenses,&rdquo; said Patronis, who has worked with Constantine on legislation in the past.

The amended version of the bill, which was approved by the Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee on Wednesday, exempts counties with debts on incinerators that need to be paid off with revenues. Bay County&rsquo;s incinerator is in the clear.

&ldquo;While some purists might not call it recycling, it is undoubtedly and undeniably reuse, because we&rsquo;re creating renewable energy out of this waste that we&rsquo;re burning,&rdquo; Lovett said. &ldquo;The fact of the matter is that we have an incinerator in the &rsquo;80s that we were encouraged to build ... We&rsquo;ve got it, and we&rsquo;ve got to find the best use for it.&rdquo;

Constantine cautioned, though, that the goal of his bill remains increasing the amount of recycling in the state, and that Bay County&rsquo;s incinerator, once out of the red (which could happen in about 15 years), will no longer be exempt.

&ldquo;We&rsquo;re trying to move people in that direction, where they&rsquo;re burning true trash,&rdquo; Constantine said. &ldquo;We are making the conditional exception for those that, not planning for this, had made prior commitments. But we&rsquo;ve got to start moving in that direction.&rdquo;

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