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Environmental

Fired up
Detroit incinerator's long-simmering opposition
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Photo: Dan Danilowicz

Sign of past times: A late '80s protest.

AUDIO

"**Curt Guyette discusses this story on WDET**" (MP3)

By Curt Guyette

There aren't hundreds of demonstrators marching through the streets of Detroit, carrying signs and shouting slogans. There are no daring activists scaling the Ambassador Bridge and the Renaissance Center to unfurl protest banners. And there are no marathon public hearings that attract overflow crowds of people willing to wait until the wee hours of the morning to have their opinions heard.

That's the way things were two decades ago when a collection of Cass Corridor poets, artists and musicians formed the Evergreen Alliance and joined with mainstream environmentalists, activist lawyers and the province of Ontario in an attempt to keep America's largest municipal waste incinerator from firing up.

They didn't succeed. The incinerator has been fully operational since 1989, burning the city's garbage (as well as trash trucked in from the suburbs) to produce steam and electricity in a process known as "waste to energy."

That power has come at a heavy price. When what's formally known as the Detroit Resource Recovery Facility turns 20 next year, the city's taxpayers will have shelled out a total of about $1.2 billion to pay off bonds issued to finance construction costs and install upgraded air-pollution control equipment, according to a study done by the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor.

The retirement of those bonds presents Detroit with a once-in-a-generation opportunity. It can continue burning its waste, or it can move instead to a model that places an intense focus on recycling, with the remainder being sent to landfills.

Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's administration says it wants to increase recycling rates regardless of the incinerator's status. Critics, however, are skeptical of just how intense those efforts will be if the burner remains in operation. As the city's population continues to drop, there is a corresponding decrease in the amount of garbage being generated — garbage needed to keep the turbines turning.

Industry representative Ted Michaels calls that argument a "red herring."

But this is not just about recycling. There are big questions about how much it will cost to continue using the incinerator. Although taxpayers will have finally paid it off next year, the city no longer owns it. The facility was sold to private investors back in 1991. It was a complicated deal, but the bottom line was that city government received $54 million in cash to help cover a budget deficit. In return, it leased the facility and paid enough in disposal or "tipping" fees to make sure the bond payments were met.

The city now has the option to buy the facility back. Or it could continue to lease. But, so far, the Kilpatrick administration is refusing to disclose what the costs of those decisions might be.

Opponents of incineration are fearful that the city will again enter into a deal that produces a crushing financial burden for taxpayers while continuing an approach toward waste they say our environment can't sustain.

Supporters of "waste to energy" like to refer to garbage as a renewable resource because it is always being produced; twenty-five states, in fact, classify it as such.

Critics say that defining garbage as a renewable resource just doesn't make sense: When paper is burned instead of recycled, more trees must be cut down to replace it. When plastic is burned instead of recycled, more oil has to be pumped from the ground to make yet more bottles and tubing.

And, even though Deputy Mayor Anthony Adams — Kilpatrick's appointed head of the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority board that oversees the incinerator — says claims about the incinerator's negative impact on the health of area residents are "alarmist," activists continue to point to the tons of toxins spewing from the facility's smokestack as perhaps the most pressing reason to see it closed.

These concerns — dealing as they do with a mixture of economic, health and environmental issues — are much the same as they were back in the mid-1980s, when Cass Corridor denizens such as Carol Izant and Ralph Franklin began growing increasingly alarmed about plans to build the incinerator near the intersection of Interstates 94 and 75 on Detroit's near east side.

Through a combination or public education, political theater and in-your-face protests, they helped mount a fierce struggle to keep the facility from operating.

That approach is markedly different than the one being taken now. Instead of staging mass marches, a small but dedicated cadre of activists has been working with City Council member JoAnn Watson to educate her colleagues on the issue. They've also been involved in a dialogue with Deputy Mayor Adams in an attempt to convince the Kilpatrick administration that continued use of the incinerator is a bad investment.

They've had significant success with regard to the council. Two weeks ago, on a 6-2 vote, a resolution was passed calling for the city to adopt a waste program utilizing a combination of landfills and recycling. Last week, after Kilpatrick vetoed that resolution, the council, again on a 6-2 vote, overrode his veto, setting the stage for the issue to be battled out as the budget for the upcoming fiscal year is cobbled together. Technically, the decision of what to do about the incinerator is in the hands of the GDRRA board. But the council must approve the authority's budget, so it has the power of the purse on its side.

Certainly this is a confrontation being watched with intense interest by the incinerator industry, which has seen the number of waste-to-energy facilities drop drastically in the last decade in the face of intense public opposition.

In 1990, according to a *New York Times* report, there were 122 waste-to-energy plants in this country. Now, according to industry sources, there are just 87.

But, buoyed by the hope that soaring oil and natural gas prices will again make burning garbage to generate power an option politicians and the public will buy into, it is an industry that's striving to make a comeback. Although no new plants have been given operating permits, several existing facilities are in the process of being expanded.

One of the main pitches involves an issue that had not yet become part of the public debate when the Detroit incinerator was being fought over back in the 1980s and early '90s: global warming.

Waste-to-energy incinerators produce less of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide than coal-powered electric plants, and landfills are a source of methane — which is 25 times more potent than CO2 in terms of its greenhouse effect.

"Through the combustion of everyday household trash in facilities with state-of the-art environmental controls, Integrated Waste Services Association [an incineration industry trade group] members provide viable alternatives to communities that would otherwise have no alternative but to buy power from conventional power plants and dispose of their trash in landfills," Ted Michaels, the group's president, wrote last year.

In a phone interview with *Metro Times*, Michaels blamed outmoded ways of thinking for much of the opposition to waste-to-energy incinerators.

"I think there is a fair amount of misunderstanding based on data that is 20 or 25 years old," he says.

Claims that incinerators are a "green" power source made critics gag in the 1980s. The same reflex occurs now. But there's one difference between the battle then and the one currently under way in Detroit.

When Izant and Franklin were helping push the Evergreen Alliance's agenda, theirs was a movement comprised primarily of whites — both urban and suburban.

This time around, the Environmental Justice Task Force convened by Watson is well-integrated. Incinerator opponents are more diverse — and, consequently, in a stronger position — than they were two decades ago.

In a region that has long maintained a destructive rift between blacks and whites, city and suburbs — most recently brought to the fore by an embattled Mayor Kilpatrick talking trash about the bigoted white media that's out to lynch him — there's more than a little irony in seeing garbage disposal bringing the disparate residents of this region closer together.

Opposition to the incinerator is cutting across racial, economic and geographic boundaries in a way that's far too rare here.

First conceived during the 1970s, the Detroit incinerator has a tangled history. Tracing the path that's led to this crucial juncture is important, says Franklin, because "to understand the present, you have to know the past."

"It is," he adds, "an amazing story that keeps continuing."

Lighting the way

With the approval of then-Mayor Coleman Young, the city of Detroit began planning to build a massive trash incinerator in 1975, according to a history of the facility complied by the environmental group Greenpeace.

By the early 1980s, the incinerator was already generating controversy. Combustion Engineering, the company contracted to build it, claimed the Detroit facility would have state-of-the-art pollution controls. But another incinerator then being built in San Francisco by the same company had more effective equipment.

A year later an article about the incinerator caught the attention of a Cass Corridor resident, who began raising an alarm.

Among those answering the call were Carol Izant and Ralph Franklin, both of whom were then in their early 30s. During a recent interview with *Metro Times* at Izant's home in Southfield, they recalled those days as heady times when, as Izant says, "we felt like we could accomplish anything."

A group of predominantly white Cass Corridor residents formed what became the Evergreen Alliance. It had no elected officers; decisions were reached by consensus rather than with votes. Perhaps 25 or 30 people formed the core. They set about educating themselves about incinerators, growing increasingly concerned about what they perceived to be both an environmental and economic catastrophe.

Franklin was a bass guitarist with the group the Layabouts back then, holding down a day job as a design instructor at what was then known as the Center for Creative Studies. Izant, an artist and mother of a boy who was still a toddler when she became involved with the alliance, worked as a patient advocate at Harper Hospital. But the effort to halt the incinerator, she says, "took over my life."

Some mainstream environmentalists from groups like the Sierra Club looked on the alliance members as "troublemakers," says Franklin.

"We refused to get into legal battles with the city," Franklin recalls. "That's what the city wanted, because they had all the money. But we wanted them to fight us on our terms. Our commitment was to direct action."

Court battles were waged, but the alliance left that task to groups like the Sierra Club. Alliance members passed out fliers to spread word about the incinerator's potential problems. They staged marches that drew hundreds of people.

"Most of the demonstrations we had, we didn't have permits for," says Izant. She was among a group of people arrested for disorderly conduct while blocking the entrance to the incinerator in June of 1989.

And there were attempts to intimidate.

"You'd wake up in the morning and see a police car just sitting there out in front of your house," she recalls.

They found kindred spirits in the members of Greenpeace, which sent in teams of climbers from Canada and the West Coast to scale the Ambassador Bridge and the Renaissance Center to hang protest banners.

"Their preparation the night before a climb was just phenomenal," says Franklin. "Their motto was: 'Nobody gets hurt. Nothing gets broken.' And they did it."

"If people tried doing now what we were doing then, they'd be arrested under the Patriot Act as terrorists."

He says this without cracking a smile.

Ash backlash

It didn't take long before critics of the incinerator began seeing proof that their fears were well-founded.

In 1988, during test burns at the facility, workers at the site began growing ill. They suffered rashes, swollen throats, uncontrollable nose bleeds, coughing fits and skin blisters. They were told not to wear their work clothes home because of the danger it might pose to their families.

"And they were saying, 'If it's so dangerous we can't even take our clothes home, how bad is it to be working there?" says Franklin.

The workers twice walked off the job in protest, and the Michigan Department of Public Health eventually levied a $5,000 fine against the incinerator authority for workplace health violations.

The ash proved to be a problem for more than just the workers exposed to it.

At the time, the Evergreen Alliance reported it this way:

"Ash from the incinerator was found to be toxic in all tests performed by the Evergreen Alliance, Greenpeace, the Southeast Michigan Coalition on Occupational Safety and Health, the Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Health."

By law, it was too dangerous to dump in a standard landfill. But disposing of it as hazardous waste was deemed too costly — perhaps 10 times as much as originally anticipated. The state Legislature, acting with an urgency rarely seen, responded by quickly changing the law, allowing the ash to be designated as a "special waste" that made it less costly to dispose of. Alliance members described the ash as having been "linguistically detoxified."

In retrospect, though, Franklin and Izant realize that by the time they became involved it was probably already too late to keep the incinerator from becoming fully operational.

The city had already issued $478 million in bonds to construct the facility. The debt alone would prove to be crushing — there's no way it could afford that sort of cost for a facility it couldn't use.

There was, however, at least one significant victory. In April of 1990, the state ordered that the plant's air pollution control equipment had to be upgraded, and the incinerator was briefly closed. Unfortunately, it was Detroit taxpayers who had to take on the $179 million debt the improvements created.

Then-Mayor Coleman Young was furious. Newspaper reports from the time quote him as saying that the state had led him to believe the upgrades wouldn't be required.

Claiming he'd been "double-crossed," Young told reporters: "This is Earth Week, and they wanted a sacrificial lamb to lay at the altar of the environment. They got the big one — Detroit."

In a way, that statement reflected the rift that existed between the city's majority black population and the predominantly white environmental groups battling the incinerator.

At the time, there was a widespread fear that the state would soon run out of space at landfills. Nightmare images of barges filled with garbage floating on the Detroit River affected people's judgment.

The fears proved to be unfounded. Dave Dempsey, now communications director for the group Conservation Minnesota and the respected author of several books focusing on Midwestern environmental issues, was environmental policy adviser to Gov. Jim Blanchard during the latter part of the 1980s. Several things occurred that kept landfills as a low-cost option for garbage disposal: Dumps that were once largely "mom-and-pop kinds of operations" were bought up by big waste companies, which were able to greatly expand their capacity. Also, state law was changed to prohibit yard waste — a significant part of the waste stream — from being sent to landfills; it began to be composted instead. Another change in state law mandated that counties had to plan adequately for landfill capacity.

Those three factors combined to keep prices relatively low.

At one point, however, before the health, pollution and economic problems associated with them became fully known, there was a plan to construct 40 of the burners around the state. Dempsey now rues any attempts to move in that direction.

As the country's largest municipal incinerator, Detroit's is the most visible example of that failure.

"It has been a real loser all the way around," Dempsey says. "I don't know why the city would even want to consider continuing to use it at this point."

But at the time the incinerator was first proposed and built, it looked like it could be a revenue generator instead of the huge financial drain it has become.

"I think some part of Coleman Young really thought that the city was going to be able to make a lot of money buy burning garbage," says Izant, now a Sierra Club volunteer. "It sounded like a good thing."

"He was sold a bill of goods," says Franklin.

"Once the thing got going, and they started selling bonds, it was a done deal. The thing took on its own momentum."

Franklin also talks about Young being a master of playing political hardball, making sure community groups would line up behind him by threatening to cut off their funding if they didn't.

As attorney Tom Stephens and Izant wrote in 1991: "It is not possible at this stage to summarize the situation of the Detroit incinerator in any straight-forward way. It should be clear that Detroit is mired in an ecological/financial mess with no easy way out. Wealthy multinational corporations are (as usual) leading politicians around by their noses, playing environmentalists off against the urban poor, pitting both against organized labor, and fighting hard to stem the rising tide of the international grassroots eco-justice movement."

But it is even more complicated than that.

Race and waste

Donele Wilkins is currently head of the nonprofit Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. But in the late 1980s she'd never heard of the term. An African-American, she was focused on workplace health issues at the time.

There were a number of factors that prevented the city's majority black population from joining forces with environmentalists, she says.

"For starters," Wilkins says, "you had Coleman Young, a powerful, charismatic mayor who the people of Detroit trusted. And I think he was bamboozled into going for this."

And his constituents followed him.

There was also the perception that "white people were always mad at the city anyway, so why should you take what they had to say seriously? There was no reason to believe they had our best interests at heart.

"We wanted to believe that this was good, clean, cutting-edge technology that was going to move the city forward."

A massive PR campaign by the incinerator industry helped cement that impression.

White environmentalists also bear a share of the responsibility for the disconnect, Wilkins says.

"They just thought (black) people would automatically get behind them," she explains. "They really didn't know how to build relationships in the community. You can't just bring an issue to people and say 'get on board' while ignoring other issues in their community."

The phenomenon of environmental racism — the practice of disproportionately putting polluting industries and waste disposal sites in minority communities — is well-recognized now.

"But back then," she explains, "we didn't really know about this environmental justice stuff. It wasn't until later that my community became more aware and began to define the environment as the place where we live."

The situation is different now. That's not to say the integration of the opposition forces was automatic — even with an African-American City Council member as a driving force behind formation of the coalition, says Rhonda Anderson, an environmental justice organizer for Sierra Club in Detroit. But the coalition that council member JoAnn Watson and others have helped bring together is clearly diverse.

"This model that has formed, it reflects everything that is good and that's needed if Detroit and this region — in fact, the entire state of Michigan — are going to survive. We are a mix of people who have come together," says Wilkins.

"And we have to. We saw what happened before. They [white environmentalists] couldn't shut it down without us, and we can't shut it down now without them."

In a significant way, the divide has narrowed. And it's garbage that has helped bridge that gap.

Like Wilkins says, "The wind blows in all directions."

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