When a local government proposes to solve the garbage crisis by building an incinerator, critics say, (1) it will be far costlier than you're being told--it already has been--and that will be toxic and therefore will create expensive and liability-laden environmental problems; (2) you need to keep the garbage flowing in to pay off the loans on the incinerator, so you will become a garbage junkie, unable to break the habit, unable to initiate modern programs like waste reduction or recycling.

But the big engineering firms and their bankrollers accuse these critics of being narrow-minded nimbies lacking technical expertise, hysterical housewives who are anti-progress, anti-business, anti-everything.

Politicians are caught in the middle. They may sense that these huge projects seem reminiscent of an older, discredited way of doing things, but they know which side their bread has always been buttered on; it seems dangerous to oppose what the big boys are proposing. So a whole generation of local politicians has staked its reputation (and its retirement benefits) on building garbage incinerators.

The first garbage incinerator in New Jersey came on line last July with great fanfare. Officials trumpeted to the media that this was the wave of the future, the solution to the state's mountainous trash woes. Sixteen other garbage burners are now in the pipeline in New Jersey, steadily abuilding. The only one that has come on line is in rural Warren county, and its story should be a lesson to local politicians everywhere: be careful before you buy one of these expensive machines--they really are more trouble than you're being told.

Set amid corn fields and woodlands 40 miles west of Newark, NJ, the Warren county plant is losing $12,000 a day every day it operates. It has run up a deficit of $1.5 million during its first 6 months of operation. The plant cost $52 million to build and it's supposed to burn 2200 tons of garbage each week (400 tons per day), but in reality it's only processing 1600 tons per week, 27% below expectations. The firm that built it, owns it, and operates it under contract to the county, Blount Engineering of Montgomery, Alabama, agreed to charge the county "only" $98 per ton but that was based on 2200 tons per week. (Blount turns some of the trash into steam, then into electricity, and sells the electricity at a profit. This is how they can afford to charge "only" $98 per ton for the garbage.) With fewer tons coming into the plant, the county will have to pay Blount more--up to $135 per ton. The county doesn't have that kind of money, so now officials are scrambling to find more garbage to bring into the county, to meet their obligations to Blount. Warren county has become a garbage junkie--desperately seeking ways to import garbage, to keep up the payments on its expensive machine. Warren officials are negotiating now with nearby Hunterdon county, wooing that county's trash.

It is important to bring in more trash because the alternative--making cash payments to Blount instead of giving them the required 2200 tons of trash weekly--will drive up the price per ton that the people of Warren county have to pay to get rid of their garbage. If the price rises much above $98 per ton, the whole project could collapse because it won't be able to compete with other ways of handling the county's trash. (To try to make the economics looked good, New Jersey passed a law making it illegal for Warren residents to send their trash anywhere outside the county. But competition from composters and recyclers inside the county could drive the incinerator over a cliff.)

Warren officials are blaming their trash shortage on the state's mandatory recycling law, which has just begun to take effect. The state's law only requires 25% recycling and it hasn't achieved anything close to that yet--but it has already become clear that even a little recycling is devastating to the economics of an incinerator. If New Jersey ever got really serious and achieved over 70% recycling, which seems to be possible to do (see RHWN #108), the state's 16 incinerators would all turn into fabulously expensive white elephants. This means that politicians who are pushing these projects will have to take a stand against recycling--thus committing themselves to resisting the tidal wave of recycling now sweeping the country.

The Warren incinerator has run into other unexpected problems. The 480 tons per week of ash left over from burning Warren's garbage actually has tested toxic 45% of the time, and the incinerator was built on the assumption that it would produce toxic ash only 30% of the time. When the ash tests toxic, it can't be shipped to a dump in Pennsylvania for $60 per ton, but must be shipped to the Model Cities hazardous waste landfill (operated by Chemical Waste Management, Inc.) in Niagara County, New York, where the cost of disposal is $250 per ton.

Warren officials have now started to search for the source of the toxic metals (cadmium and lead) that are playing havoc with their ash. However, they admit it's like "looking for a needle in a haystack," says Bart Carhart, executive director of Warren county's pollution control financing authority. Mr. Carhart says he hopes they can find the cadmium source without having to cut off all industrial trash coming into the incinerator. Cutting off the industrial trash flow would make the project's financial picture even bleaker.

Politicians must understand that these incinerators are not a bad deal for everyone--they're only bad for taxpayers and for politicians. Incinerators make good sense from the viewpoint of companies like Blount Engineering. They build the plant with other people's (taxpayers') money, so they're taking no financial risk. They have a contract that says the local government must "put or pay"--put sufficient garbage into the furnace to make it run profitably, or pay the difference in cash. If the ash tests toxic, local government has to pay the added expense, not Blount. When the whole thing sags because of citizen pressure to start recycling programs, or pressure from environmentalists to tighten the lax definition of ash toxicity, Blount won't fare any worse. Even if the whole project goes bust, Blount has already made most of its money--the big profits were in the construction of the machine itself. And after all, no Blount official ever has to stand for election; it's local politicians who will take the heat while local taxpayers pick up the tab. Blount will be long gone, wooing other politicians in other towns, selling blue sky solutions to our brown and earthy problems.

--Peter Montague

=====

WRENCING IN TEXARKANA: FEB. 10-12

The Wrenching Debate series of grass roots meetings, and confrontations with polluters, continues February 10-12 in Texarkana, Arkansas. (See RHWN #96 and #105.) These meetings aim to discover a new direction for grass roots work. Lois Gibbs, John O'Connor, and a phalanx of local grass roots activists will confront themselves to resisting the tidal wave of recycling now sweeping the country.

The Wrench meeting begins at 1:00 Friday afternoon at the Mount Zion Baptist Church (221 Tilson St., Texarkana). Other events are scheduled throughout the weekend.

--Peter Montague

=====

Descriptor terms: incineration; warren county, nj; ash; cadmium; lead; hazardous waste; landfilling; blount engineering; al; recycling; citizen activism;