For two decades, New Jersey has been on the frontier of the garbage crisis. The state legislature started closing landfills a decade ago because landfills pollute groundwater and because the state’s population growth has put a heavy demand on landfill space. The legislature intended to keep hazardous waste out of the state, but local opposition and bureaucratic delays have prevented startup of even a single incinerator. The state-wide recycling bill passed the legislature in 1987 but it will take time (and political will) to implement. In the meantime, waste is piling up; in late 1987, two major landfills closed, leaving 3.7 million NJ citizens—half the state’s population—with no place to put their trash. Governor Tom Kean, a Republican with vice-Presidential hopes, desperately needed a solution or at least the appearance of a solution.

In the summer of 1987, Governor Kean found a friend in Pennsylvania. As a result, New Jersey is starting the new year shipping half its garbage to landfills in western Pennsylvania, most of them 300 miles from New Jersey.

Governor Kean’s Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has forced (or helped, depending on who you talk to) New Jersey’s six northern counties to build trash transfer stations and to make contracts with out-of-state trash haulers. The Chambers Development Company of Penn Hills, PA (near Pittsburgh) made a deal to take New Jersey’s garbage for three to five years. It’s a lucrative business: Chambers will be paid $92 to $116 per ton for hauling New Jersey’s garbage, and they plan to take 6000 tons per day; at $100 per ton that’s $600,000 per day, or $220 million per year.

The contracts to take New Jersey’s trash represent a tremendous boon for Chambers, whose total sales in 1986 were only $31 million. Chambers currently operates four landfills in western Pennsylvania. The company also hauls trash in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. Chambers also has a wholly owned subsidiary called Security Bureau, Inc., which provides uniformed guard service, special event security, crisis management, loss prevention and investigative (detective) services--a curious mix of enterprises. Chambers is a family-owned business. Though it is traded publicly, 70% of Chambers stock is owned by the family of J. G. Rangos, Sr. The company’s Vice President is M.J. Peretto.

Pennsylvania has only 30 landfills operating in the state, and these will be filled within five years, according to the Department of Environmental Resources (DER). The influx of New Jersey’s garbage will cut the remaining lifetime of Pennsylvania’s landfills to 2.5 years, says a spokesperson for the DER (Harrisburg PATRIOT NEWS Aug. 6, 1987). If this is true, it means that New Jersey has not bought itself as much time as it thought: Chambers has 5-year contracts with some New Jersey counties. Where will Chambers put New Jersey’s garbage when Pennsylvania’s existing landfills are full?

Shortly after Chambers and New Jersey made their well-publicized contracts, a small Pennsylvania landfill operator less than 60 miles from the New Jersey border applied to the DER for an expansion permit for a small dump in Foster Township. Beltrami Enterprises owns a 3300-acre parcel of land in Foster Township and its owner, Louis Beltrami, naturally sees an opportunity here. Mr. Beltrami anticipates that he can generate $23.25 million the first year of operation, even if he restricts his business to Pennsylvania garbage. But his application clearly states that he intends to take garbage from anyone who’s willing to pay. New Jersey would certainly rather pay to send its garbage 60 miles than 300 miles, so it looks like Foster Township, Pennsylvania, is being offered as a sacrificial lamb on the altar of New Jersey’s political failures. And Mr. Beltrami stands to get rich--really rich really quick.

Unfortunately, the proposed site for Mr. Beltrami’s landfill is geologically comparable to Swiss cheese. The area (called Buck Mountain) is honeycombed with old coal mine shafts. Furthermore, according to available geologic reports, the rock formations are heavily fractured and fault lines run through the site. The aquifers underlying the site provide drinking water to local families, so groundwater pollution would be a serious matter. The surface of the site contains large sinkholes where the surface has simply dropped out of sight. It is probably as bad a place as one could pick for a large landfill.

Local citizens are fighting the proposal. SOLE II in Weatherly, PA, and Concerned Citizens of Foster Township don’t want Foster Township to become the garbage capital of the east coast. Mr. Beltrami has tried to buy acceptance for his scheme: he has offered Foster Township 2% of his profits right off the top ($465,000 per year, even if he keeps the operation small and only takes in $23.25 million per year)—a princely sum for a small town. In response, local politicians amended the local zoning ordinance to accommodate Mr. Beltrami. Citizens responded by running their own candidate for town council, and winning. The sense of power that local people gain is a real, permanent benefit from a fight like this. And gaining a sense of how things really work is also invaluable: in modern America, issues of good and evil boil down to technology and money intertwined in a struggle that is, at bottom, political. The winners are usually a few entrepreneurs and a few politicians. The losers are usually all the people. But it doesn’t have to be that way. In the same way local people in Foster elected one of their own to office, people everywhere can choose their fate, if they will get serious, get to work, and organize.

The root cause of the garbage crisis is the unwillingness of government to intervene in industrial decisions. Municipal solid waste is hazardous to human health and is therefore unwelcome in any community of alert citizens. Until government takes steps to reduce the use of toxic materials, to detoxify the solid waste stream at its source, garbage will be a large and dangerous problem. And where there are large problems, there are large opportunities for self-interested business people and self-serving politicians to engage in shell games. Tom Kean evidently believes he can dazzle the people with fancy footwork, so he won’t have to face the real issue. Messrs. Rangos, Peretto and Beltrami simply intend to get rich. The serious losers are the people who pay vastly inflated prices for public services (the cost of garbage in Newark, NJ, will increase from $6 million in 1987 to $30 million in 1988--a rise of $200 per family) and the people forced to live with the inevitable consequences of pollution. Recycling is part of the answer, but even after an item has been recycled three or four times, it will be discarded. Whether it is safe to discard is the issue, and that is a question to be answered by peering inside America’s industrial enterprise. Are there any politicians on the scene with the will to do that? If not, let’s get organized and put some there. That’s a new year’s resolution worth making.

--Peter Montague

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