

## Large turnout in Santa Rosa for garbage fight

Questions over public meeting rules have opponents crying foul

by Frank Robertson  
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*GARBAGE ARGUMENTS — Alan Strachan (left) makes a point to Bruce Robinson of KRCB after a public forum to discuss the fate of the Mecham Road garbage facility. Strachan represents the North Bay Corporation. - Photo by Frank Robertson*

SANTA ROSA — Key players in Sonoma County's garbage hauling industry clashed this week over ongoing closed-door talks to sell the county's landfill operations to a private contractor.

The issue of recycling rather than continuing to bury garbage in a landfill is now "the largest public policy question on our watch," said recycling advocate Alan Strachan at the garbage forum held Monday in Santa Rosa.

If waste disposal methods were being planned from scratch today, "There's no way we would think about buying 400 acres of land" on which to bury millions of tons of trash, said Strachan, regarding the county's effort to sell its 400-acre county dump that is now closed to commercial use.

Strachan and about a dozen other industry participants attended Monday's forum to address county plans to sell its landfill operations to a private garbage conglomerate such as Waste Management Inc., the largest garbage company in the U.S.

Strachan represents the North Bay Corporation, which owns trash hauling companies serving most of Sonoma County. North Bay has plans to build a state-of-the-art Santa Rosa material recycling facility next year that is seen as a competitor to the county's effort to turn over landfill operations to a private company.

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A key to a successful divestiture deal is a long-term commitment by Sonoma County's cities and the county to send their trash to the landfill's new owner.

Trash haulers pay \$93 a ton to dump their trash at county transfer sites where it is then trucked to landfills outside the county at an added cost of about \$15 million a year to dispose of approximately 300,000 tons of trash.

State water officials closed the Mecham Road dump in 2005 because leachate threatened to pollute ground water. Whether to reopen the landfill as a private operation based on the obsolete practice of burying trash "is a huge question, a huge issue," Strachan told the audience of about 100 people Monday at Santa Rosa City Hall.

Major progress in recycling and reuse of garbage instead of burying it in a landfill means "It's cheaper to recycle than to bury," said Strachan.

Ultimately the money saved with an efficient recycling facility "will cover the cost of closing the landfill," said Strachan, "with no change in rates."

The county has estimated the cost to permanently close and monitor its landfills could run as high as \$100 million, an expense it hopes to pass on to the private company that buys the county's operation.

For more than a year the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors have been discussing landfill divestiture in weekly closed-session meetings, a process that critics say violates the state's Brown Act law that requires public business to be conducted in public.

County Transportation and Public Works Director Phil Demery defended the process at Monday's meeting, saying the closed-session talks are necessary "to protect the business interests of the proposers" interested in taking over the landfill.

The divestiture issue does raise complex environmental issues concerning trash recycling, reuse, greenhouse gas reduction and other issues that go beyond a real estate transaction, said Demery, but those will be aired out in public forums starting later this year, possibly as early as June.

Divestiture will require a commitment to send trash to the landfill's new owner but that doesn't preclude an emphasis on recycling rather than burying trash, said Demery.

"It's not a question of either recycling or burying," said Demery, who called Strachan's argument "a mischaracterization of the whole process."

Even under the best-case recycling scenario there will still be a need for a landfill, said Demery.

"We have to have a place to send our residual waste," said Demery.

With the county's Mecham Road site closed to commercial waste haulers, about 65 big-rig truckloads of county garbage are now hauled daily to neighboring counties for disposal.

Demery agreed that sending the county's garbage elsewhere "is not the environmentally responsible thing to do." But the cost, projected at \$70 million, of reopening the Mecham dump site is more than the county can afford.

Divestiture to a private operator "is the only way that we can get an in-county landfill," said Demery.

"The county doesn't have \$70 million" to bring the landfill site into compliance with state clean water regulations, said Demery.

In contrast, some of the large waste haulers interested in the landfill "have more money than the state," said Demery. "They have the financial horsepower that we don't have."

The closed-door negotiations, which include confidentiality agreements with participating city officials, "is a normal jurisdictional process," said Demery.

The divestiture proposal will be put out for public review, including a decision by city governments on whether to commit to taking their trash and recyclables to the new owners. Without those contracts "divestiture is going nowhere," said Demery.

June is also when North Bay Corporation's proposed recycling facility and environmental center is expected to be up for public review at the county planning department.

As proposed, the North Bay project could recycle 90 percent of the city and county's waste

stream.

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