



Detroit “Trash:” Opportunity for a Whole New System

Zero Waste Detroit
June 2019

On March 27th, the owners of Detroit Renewable Power announced that it was permanently closing, with the CEO stating that it was impossible to operate within the law and turn a profit. For 30 years, the incinerator received and burned Detroit’s municipal waste and that of many suburbs, states and even Canada. It was a model designed on mass consumption and lack of awareness of and attention to the effects of consumption, and false narratives that incinerating municipal waste is cheap and a good bargain regardless of effects on public health, particularly children’s.

With the burner closed, it is the time to accelerate the City’s commitment to an entirely different approach to waste: one that sees municipal and commercial waste as a river of commodities to be harvested for local economic activity and jobs. This will happen only by design and intention with long term thinking. It is time for the City to sunset the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority (GDRRA).

GDRRA was designed and missioned to serve the incinerator. It is a quasi-governmental agency with a board that has not held a public meeting in multiple years, a violation of the Public Meetings Act. GDRRA’s budget is under the Department of Public Works, but it has a separate audit. There is lack of transparency and accountability to Council and residents. GDRRA’s mission is outdated and out of sync with the challenges of the 21st century. The City needs an office/agency with the primary task to think circular economy, waste prevention, waste reduction and recycling—a different focus than that of GDRRA.

We are in a time of growing awareness of how our consumption, our throw-away culture, is impacting our home and Earth’s health for future generations. People, and governing bodies, are growing in appreciation of the interconnection between waste habits and climate change. We know that the time left to address greenhouse gasses is limited. According to a report by John Flesher of the Associated Press, the Great Lakes region is warming faster than the rest of the U.S., a trend likely to bring more extreme storms while also degrading water quality, worsening erosion and posing tougher challenges for farming, one of Michigan’s top industries.

Recycling and waste reduction, as it turns out, is one thing that each household and municipalities can do to lower our collective carbon footprint.

Several things are in place to make positive strides.

- Mayor Duggan signed on with 400 mayors to continue forward with the goals of the Paris Climate Accord.
- The City now has an Office of Sustainability, hard at work creating a Sustainability Action Agenda for the next 8-10 years.
- The Department of Public Works has applied for assistance to expand recycling services to large multi-family units and businesses serviced by the City.

- City Council passed a resolution in support of planning for recycling and waste reduction goals, and its Green Task Force is nudging the City toward recycling in municipal buildings and public spaces.

A shift in approach is required, from “Where do we take the waste for the lowest cost?” to “What do we need to best engage residents in anti-littering and waste reduction?” and “How can Detroit transition to what other large cities are doing to build recycling and think of waste recovery long term?” The City needs an office/agency fully transparent and accountable to the Mayor, City Council and residents, and laser-focused on building a “materials management” or waste system, that contributes to the circular economy (green jobs for our community) and reduces carbon emissions.

Sunsetting GDRRA and establishing a highly visible Recycling and Waste Reduction Campaign will inform Detroiters that now is the time to bear down on recycling, not give up. These benefits are achievable if the Mayor, Detroit City Council, and organized citizens and businesses successfully adapt the best practices from other cities to Detroit’s unique landscape.

There is no reason to waste this opportunity.

Zero Waste Detroit organizations:

Bagley Community Council, Detroit Audubon, Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance, Detroit Food Policy Council, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, East Michigan Environmental Action Council, Ecology Center, Freedom Freedom, Global Alliance for Alternatives to Incineration, Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit, Great Lakes Environmental Law Center, Green Door Initiative, Greenacres Woodward Civic Association, Institute for Local Self Reliance, Michigan Environmental Council, Midtown Alliance, Rosedale Recycles, Sierra Club Environmental Justice Program, Sierra Club Southeast Michigan Group, Southwest Detroit Community Benefits Coalition, Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision, Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice, Voices for Earth Justice, We Want Green, Too!, 48217 Community & Environmental Health Organization