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## Metro Considers Biogas Plant For Northeast Portland

Rob Manning | December 9, 2010 | Portland, OR

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When you go out to dinner, you ever wonder what happens to the food you don't eat, or that you bring home in a doggy bag?

Most of it goes to Oregon landfills, where experts say food waste makes up nearly a third of our garbage. But a facility proposed for Portland intends to change that, by turning food scraps into electricity.

Rob Manning reports on a proposed "biogas" plant, scheduled before the Metro Council Thursday.

When grocery stores throw out expired loaves of bread and restaurants dump your half-eaten ravioli, the waste may pass through here. It's a waste transfer station.

Next stop is a landfill. And there, the food will decompose slowly over time, and emit the greenhouse gas, methane.

Landfills have gotten better at limiting methane over the years. But John McKinney says he has a better idea. He's the founder of Columbia Biogas.

John McKinney: "Basically, the facility is taking in organic food waste, in the form of solid and liquid food waste from the Portland metropolitan region. And recycling it, if you will, into energy – in the form of electricity and heat, and clean water, and fertilizer products."

There are already Oregon farms and sewage treatment plants turning organic material into electricity, and the other by-products of water and fertilizer.

McKinney says Europe is building plants to deal with commercial food waste, from places like cafes and supermarkets. But he says the idea is new in the States.

John McKinney: "This is, from what we've been hearing, the most advanced project in the U.S., in terms of late-stage development. It will really set a standard for utilization, recycling of food waste in metropolitan areas. We see this as a trend that's really going to unfold in cities throughout the U.S."

The biogas facility would be right here on Northeast Columbia Boulevard in Portland. This is also called Highway 30. It's mostly industrial developments like a steel mill, and auto shops.

On the south side is a residential neighborhood.

A handful of neighbors have weighed in already with the Department of Environmental Quality. They're worried that dozens of truck deliveries will make traffic here worse.

They're concerned those trucks are carrying garbage – and that as it's processed into energy, it'll mean nasty smells, and maybe noxious chemicals in the air. Longtime residents still recall a different garbage facility here back in the early 1990s.



Rob Manning / OPB

Northeast Columbia Boulevard

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John McKinney: "Because of historical facilities that have been in the area – in particular Reidel – there was a lot of initial concern."

McKinney says some neighbors are slowly coming around, as they understand how his project is different from Reidel. That was a solid waste facility that closed shortly after it opened, due to persistent odor problems.

McKinney says industrial neighbors could benefit directly – because the bio-digestion would produce clean water and heat they can buy.

Local and state officials like the environmental benefits of producing power, while reducing methane emissions. But there are mixed feelings.

For instance, lots of people think of "compost" when they think of food recycling. The city of Portland is testing out a compost program – with different waste standards from the proposed biogas plant. Portland sustainable policy manager, Michael Armstrong says he's worried about confusion.

Michael Armstrong: "It does have the potential to complicate things, but it's also the sort of thing where they're looking for some big, institutional, grocery store chain, for example, customers. Whereas we're looking for something that's available across the city. Being able to differentiate between those messages is critical to us."

And then there's Metro. Remember that waste transfer station?

Well, it's managed by Metro. The regional government routinely wins environmental awards. But Metro earns much of its money by charging for processing garbage.

Margo Norton: "So, this is where you find kind of the built-in conflict between our sustainability goals and our financial goals."

Metro finance director Margo Norton says if the plant is built, and it meets McKinney's goal of processing 194,000 tons of waste a year, it would reduce the amount of garbage Metro can process and charge for. And ratepayers might be asked to pay the difference.

Margo Norton: "This could cause the cost-per-ton to the ratepayers to rise anywhere from a dollar-thirty per ton up to two-seventy-five per ton. It's pennies at the curbside."

Meanwhile, McKinney is looking for tax credits to help foot his bills. In years past, the project would very likely have had an Oregon tax credit paying a chunk of the cost. But lawmakers have pared back the business energy credit. Columbia Biogas is on a "wait list."

McKinney still has a federal subsidy covering roughly 10 million of the project's estimated \$40 million cost. If McKinney gets the environmental permits he needs, he hopes to break ground next summer.

Columbia Biogas is scheduled for a hearing in front of Metro Thursday night.

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