

Diversion trashes finances

State law requires rerouting refuse; county reworks strategy

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Jim Love of Stockton unloads a pickup bed full of trash Saturday at the North County Sanitary Landfill east of Lodi. The San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors recently approved a new plan for operating its landfills. CLIFFORD OTO/The Record

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STOCKTON - Garbage isn't what it used to be, and San Joaquin County officials have signed off a strategy to manage the county's solid waste system that is being pushed to find other uses for castoff materials while still making room in landfills.

Municipalities have been required to divert waste away from landfills and recycle more under state law. But as recycling reduces the amount of trash heading toward landfills, it takes away from the dollars coming from tonnage fees used to pay for the county-run landfills, transfer stations and various programs to handle waste. And with higher diversion requirements on the way - including pending regulation that would ban organic materials from landfills - it makes it even harder for the county to dispose of the waste under the current financial situation.

"You're kind of in the business of putting yourself out of business," said Tom Gau, director of the county Public Works Department, which includes the solid waste division.

The county Board of Supervisors recently approved a new strategy that could take operations into 2025. The next step would be to negotiate agreements with cities before changing the existing plan, which would then go before city councils and come back to the county board before being submitted to the state.

It would also formalize agreements with the cities that would allow the county to rely on some steady business over the next several years. The informal commitments were important to county officials before investing more money into its landfills, county officials said.

There is room for the North County Sanitary Landfill, near Lodi, and the Foothill Sanitary Landfill, near Linden, to grow. But the current capacity of existing areas equipped with protective lining is estimated to fill up by the end of 2015. When the board approved the strategy last month, it also agreed to invest as much as \$950,000 to add those linings.

The local system handles about 1 million tons of material a year. It includes construction debris, recyclable material, garden waste and plain garbage that is destined to for the landfill, according to the strategy. Cities and the county contract with multiple haulers that make up the system, but there are only two landfill operators: county government and the privately owned Forward Landfill.

County officials said that keeping the county's solid-waste operations viable will provide the competition that will keep rates in check.

"The very thing that we're trying to avoid is rates spiraling out of control," Supervisor Steve Bestolarides said. "It's the short term versus the long term."

And the county both offers a wider range of services and has a role that doesn't have the same profit-driven starting point as a private company, county Solid Waste Manager Desi Reno said.

"Unlike the market ... we have a stewardship role," he said. "Our rates are very competitive when it comes to the perfect solid waste system, and that's what we're intending to get to."

That role is reflected in the approved strategy, titled, in part: "Working to Keep our Future Clean, Lean and Green."

It poses some changes to funding, which, in its current form, makes it harder for the county to cover its costs.

The county relies on fees on the amount of disposal, but this money from disposal pays for other programs provided through the county. It makes it harder to compete with the rates of private landfills.

Higher rates mean fewer tons of waste being disposed at the county. To make up the lost revenue, the county increases the rates. This makes it even harder to compete with the other rates, creating a cycle referred to in the strategy as a "death spiral."

The strategy poses a few suggestions on how to pull out of the spiral. One would charge more for self-haulers. These cost more to handle than the large-scale municipal and franchise customers. But self-haulers right now can go only to the county landfills, according to the report.

The county also maintains landfills inherited from cities. But these are full and are no longer taking in new garbage or the fees that come with them. The strategy posits that a fee on parcels of land owned in the county could cover that cost.

Board Chairman Bob Elliott called the idea of putting that cost on property owners "patently unfair." He asked if the county should reconsider operating landfills if the operation is losing money.

"I'm happy to hear we're doing an excellent job. My point is, if we're looking at the future and it just doesn't pencil out for us to be in the business, then we should have a back up plan to get out of the business."

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