



Hennepin County Facility Will Turn Organic Waste into Biogas

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Hennepin County officials are planning to construct a facility that will turn organic waste into usable biogas as part of the county's ongoing efforts in environmental sustainability.

Approved unanimously by the Board of Hennepin County Commissioners June 1, the anaerobic digestion facility will process household and commercial waste including food scraps, soiled paper and compostable products, which comprise about 30% of the municipal solid waste collected in the county, according to a staff report to the board.

The facility, to be located next to the Brooklyn Park Transfer Station, will be constructed with the county's current waste collection goals in mind. The county's Solid Waste Management Plan includes a goal of recycling 75% of waste by 2030, an aspiration that will require organics recycling, the staff report mentions.

Also, part of that effort, beginning in 2022, cities in the county with populations over 10,000 will be required to provide residents with an option for household organics collection.

The anaerobic digestion facility is expected to have a processing capacity of 25,000 tons of matter per year, with the possibility of expansion to 50,000 tons.

"There is a finite amount of room that we can shove trash into," said District 1 Commissioner Jeff Lunde, of Brooklyn Park. "And if we can get stuff out of the system and turn it back into energy, I think that's a good thing."

But keeping waste out of landfills does more than save space. When organic matter decomposes on its own, it creates methane, which is 28 times more potent than carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas, the staff report notes.

Instead of turning into methane, organic waste processed at the digestion facility will become a renewable gas, Dave McNary, assistant director of the county's Solid Waste Division, told the board.

District 3 Commissioner Marion Greene, of St. Louis Park, said she hopes the gas product will serve "the hardest-to-decarbonize uses," such as heavy industry, to maximize the environmental benefit.

District 5 Commissioner Debbie Goettel, of Richfield, voiced her excitement for a facility that "pulls yet another waste stream out of the garbage and into something that's actually profitable."

There are “very few” such facilities in North America, according to McNary. The complex in Brooklyn Park will be the first such facility in the upper Midwest, he added, noting that the technology is most common in the western U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia.

District 6 Commissioner Chris LaTondresse, of Hopkins, noted his appreciation for the county’s leadership role in taking on the project. County staff traveled to other parts of the country to learn about the technology. LaTondresse expects Hennepin County to attract visitors for the same reason.

“I look forward to a day when folks are coming to Hennepin to learn about how to do this in their own communities,” he said.

The county is “sort of a beacon in the upper Midwest,” said Greene, who sees the project as a way to enhance that status.

With the project coming on the heels of the county Climate Action Plan that was approved in April, Greene views the appropriation as more proof that her colleagues are “all in” on environmental sustainability.

The board approved the appropriation of \$43.5 million for the facility’s construction. The county plans to pursue \$21 million in state general obligation bonds to help fund the project, a request that stands a good chance of success, given the facility’s regional significance, the staff report states.