

Opinion

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Don't waste millions on a new recycling facility



Your Turn
Brian Meng
Guest columnist

Recently, the Board of Directors of Metro Waste Authority (MWA) approved the purchase of \$10 million of recycling equipment for its proposed \$24 million recycling material recovery facility scheduled to come online in late 2021. As an owner of Mid America Recycling (Mid America), their current processing partner, I feel obliged to comment on the true cost of this facility to the community.

MWA seems to believe that by building its own recovery facility, it will be able to straighten out the world's supply and demand for recyclables, particularly paper. This reckless and foolhardy attitude will cost taxpayers millions of dollars – in initial construction (\$24 million) and continued operations (at least \$3 million annually) – and upend the current, effective private system.

As a for-profit company, Mid America has navigated the ups and downs of recycling successfully – using our own funds – to be viewed as one of the most respected recycling companies in the nation.

MWA's justification for building its own recovery facility is that Mid America is not a reliable partner. Let's look at the facts.

MWA claims there are deficiencies in the current contract with Mid America. In the past four years, Mid America has received over 17,500 individual deliveries of MWA recyclables without one rejection, while providing one of the lowest-cost programs in the nation.

MWA claims Mid America is unable to meet quality specs for processed recyclables. In the last four years, Mid America has shipped nearly 6,000 truckloads of recyclables to end-users with one quality issue. This is a 0.000017% product defect rate.

MWA claims it will never throw away received materials when it has its own recovery facility. Yes, Mid America did landfill mixed paper for a short period of time. This was due to a Chinese ban on mixed paper from the U.S. (which is still in place today) creating an extreme oversupply nationally. MWA was notified in advance and daily during this short-term issue while our paper mill customers adjusted their operations to utilize more mixed paper from our company. Only 30% of the daily mixed paper production was not recy-

clered during this period.

To advance its agenda, MWA has positioned Mid America as the bad guy but we are clearly not. In just a few months, we were back on track recycling mixed paper at the rate of three to four semi-loads per day.

Even though today many municipalities are still tossing recyclables because there are literally no alternatives, Mid America is back to normal shipments.

So what sets us apart? Forty years of industry experience, excellent customer relationships, and a reputation for having high-quality materials. MWA will be starting from scratch and not likely be afforded the level of respect and consideration given to Mid America.

MWA claims Mid America will not be able to meet the needs of the future. The past is the best forecaster of the future. We have over 200 years of combined experience in our ownership and management team. I myself will complete 40 years in the industry this February and most recently our company president, Mick Barry, was re-elected as chairman of the National Recycling Coalition.

In Des Moines, our company was here before single stream recycling, be-

fore curbside recycling, before drop-site recycling, and when Iowa enacted its bottle deposit law 40 years ago. Mid America was around before plastic container recycling even existed.

No one has demonstrated the ability to meet the area's ever-changing recycling needs more than Mid America. The Des Moines metro does NOT need a new material recovery facility because of lack of capabilities in the private sector.

MWA's mission has always been to take on issues that other private businesses either cannot or will not handle. Think for a moment of what an impact tens of millions of dollars of capital investment and millions of dollars of annual subsidies could have on an environmental issue not currently being served in the Metro area.

This is a complex issue, and MWA is not telling the full story. Its plan will squander more than \$24 million in taxpayer money to build an unnecessary recovery facility, duplicating an already successful private service. MWA should not move forward with this irresponsible idea.

Brian Meng is an owner of Mid America Recycling and a resident of Des Moines.