

Support for EcoMaine

At our town meetings in June we will be asked to vote on where to send our municipal solid waste (our trash). The state legislature's Environment and Natural Resources Committee, of which I've been a member for eight years and served as House Chair for four, has jurisdiction over solid waste for the state. Solid waste has been a major subject over all of these years, especially the last four. The subject is very complicated due to the varieties of needs and abilities in our large state to deal with what we throw away.

What laws we have passed continue to emphasize the need to reduce our garbage and to recycle and compost, with an emphasis on minimizing the need for landfills. Due to complicated energy market agreements and contracts, the way we, in our local area, have been disposing of our municipal solid waste is changing and is forcing us to choose a different method of disposal. The method being proposed is called Fiberight. However, our local board of municipalities is recommending that we use EcoMaine.

Fiberight, a private corporation, is a compelling and promising new technology that takes all of our garbage and uses multiple processing steps to break down our trash in a way that produces biogas. (Our previous processor, PERC, was a waste to energy plant that burned our trash to provide electricity.) However, Fiberight's technology, in what is being proposed, has not been used anywhere in the world, though parts of the technology have been. Maine will be the first to use it in its proposed form.

EcoMaine, a nonprofit, serves 55 communities in the Portland area and has been in operation for many years. It is well regarded and has received many awards for its efforts promoting recycling and waste reduction. They have a rigorous education program for their member communities, including school programs, promoting the state's hierarchy law (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Waste to energy and, lastly, Landfill). They own a single sort recycling facility, a Waste to Energy Power Plant (reduces trash to 10 percent and is considered a renewable energy), and a landfill.

I support contracting with EcoMaine for the following reasons:

1. Fiberight is a new technology. Municipalities (tax payers) should not invest in trials or uncertain enterprises until they are well tested. Failure could not only prove costly, but would also require sending large amounts of trash to landfills.
2. Fiberight requires, on June 30, signing a contract for 15 years with a lock-in amount of trash we must guarantee to send them. This is a very short timeline to make a large commitment. And, does the tonnage requirement disincentivize our reduction and recycling goals and efforts?
3. EcoMaine would provide our short-term solution while Fiberight proves its worth. EcoMaine's 20-year contract has a 5-year opt out provision, allowing us to join Fiberight when it is up and running productively.

4. There is a legitimate concern about the carbon footprint caused by trucking trash down to EcoMaine. However, they do not require a locked-in amount of trash to send them and will work to improve our reduction and recycling rate. The best way to reduce our trash costs is to reduce our trash.

For these reasons I urge voters to attend your town meetings and to vote for EcoMaine.

Rep. Joan Welsh

Rep. Joan Welsh is completing her fourth term in the Maine House of Representatives. She serves as the House chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources which has jurisdiction over solid waste and recycling policy for the State of Maine.