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Editorial: Will Sunol stink?

April 11, 2006

The answer to this question is up to a little-known board of directors. Less than 2 miles from Sunol's Main Street and across I-680 from the Sunol Golf Course, hundreds of tons of decomposing "green waste" and "food waste" will be dumped on 40 acres of land managed by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. In all, 600 tons of waste will be left to rot every day in the open for a period of 90 days. That is a whopping 54,000 tons of rotting food and green waste sitting on Andrade Road in Sunol. These piles of rotting garbage will be allowed to compost within a short distance of homes, a school, businesses, ranches, a golf driving range and a beautiful golf course.

The Alameda County Waste Management Authority (ACWMA) is a public joint-powers agency comprised of the County of Alameda, each of the fourteen cities within the county, and two sanitary districts that provide refuse collection services. ACWMA had a bright idea. Composting, a valued and proven method of converting waste into usable material, will help the county's recycling efforts and make environmentalists happy too. They bought land at the Altamont Landfill, far from human habitation to use for this purpose and it appeared that the project was headed for easy approval and acceptance.

When bureaucrats find a good and acceptable solution, it is not necessarily the path chosen. In this case, staff of the ACWMA looked for another site closer to home and one that they thought would raise little opposition. The idea was to find land in a rural area that would impact a few people who would be slow to realize what was coming before the deal was done. It is often easy to point out to politicians that few votes come from these areas and therefore, it is safe to ignore questions when protests arise. Staff can then cobble together an EIR (Environmental Impact Report) with suspect data and recommend that board members simply turn away from questions of substance.

The problem with this scenario is that instead of facing opposition from a few ignorant backwoods bozos, residents of Sunol have not only objected to this plan, but studiously examined the assumptions and data of the Draft EIR (DEIR). These are knowledgeable people who have not only scrutinized the data, but traveled to sites that were referred to as successful examples of what is proposed in Sunol. They found half truths and outright fabrications of information.

In a letter to Brian Mathews, program manager at ACWMA, local physician, Dr. William Nicholson posed 140 questions to the organization. These are serious issues of health, safety and a myriad of other problems that demand answers. The complete list can be found at www.stopthedumpinsunol.org.

The real question is why, after concerned citizens and many well respected organizations have raised these issues and found the data lacking, does the agency doggedly move ahead with its plans? A possible answer is a bullying tactic often used in cases like this. If you have the power, paint those in opposition as simple gadflies to be shooed away. Is this a case of government assuming apathy on the part of those who will not be directly affected and ignoring a clear environmental threat?

For more information, visit www.healthyacenvironment.org and www.stopthedumpinsunol.org.

The final EIR can be found at www.stopwaste.org. Click on "Organics processing development program" and then on final EIR. You can also find a full copy of this document at: ACWMA Offices, 777 Davis St, Ste 100, San Leandro; Sunol Glen School Library, 11601 Main St, Sunol; Fremont Main Library, 2400 Stevenson Blvd., Fremont; Pleasanton Public Library, 400 Old Bernal Ave, Pleasanton

ACWMA board members include: Mayor Beverly Johnson, Alameda; Councilmember Jewel Okawachi, Albany; Councilmember Dona Spring, Berkeley; Councilmember Claudia McCormick, Dublin; Mayor Ken Bukowski, Emeryville; Mayor Bob Wasserman, Fremont; Mayor Shelia Young, San Leandro; Mayor Mark Green, Union City; Board Member, Dennis Waespi, Castro Valley; Board Member, Laython Landis, San Lorenzo; Alameda County Supervisors Scott Haggerty, Gail Steele, Alice Lai-Bitker, Nate Miley and Keith Carson.

Upcoming meetings:

Wednesday, April 26 at 6 p.m.
Sunol Golf Course, Andrade Road off I-689

Thursday, May 4 at 9 a.m.
777 Davis St. Suite 100, San Leandro

THE VOTE

Wednesday, May 24 at 5 p.m.
San Leandro Community Library, 300 Estudillo Ave., San Leandro