

Parish to debate trash for cash

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • JUNE 10, 2008

In its third public hearing this year on proposals to generate money for roads, at 6 p.m. Wednesday the St. Landry Parish Council will debate a "trash for cash" plan that could generate millions of dollars for parish road improvements.

The plan would authorize the parish landfill near Beggs to accept household waste from neighboring parishes.

Tipping fees, which could amount to up to \$5 million a year, would be split equally between parish government and the parish's 12 municipalities and dedicated solely to road improvements.

While the plan was unanimously endorsed by the St. Landry Parish Municipal Association last month, it has also generated a great deal of controversy.

"Anyone who knows anything about this is horrified," said Ouida Woods, an environmentalist and concerned citizen.

She is not alone. Many, including Council Chairman Kenneth Vidrine, have expressed outrage at the idea of bringing in hundreds of tons of outside garbage.

For some, such as District 5 Councilman Ronald Buschel, the question is about the parish's image. "Our parish has a bad enough reputation without being known as the greatest garbage collector in the state," Buschel said when the idea was first proposed.

For others, like Woods, it is about protecting the environment. The local landfill is not authorized to accept hazardous waste and Katry Martin, who supervises the landfill, has said only household trash will be accepted.

Woods doesn't find that reassuring.

"They say they will only take in household trash, as if that were harmless. It is certainly not. People are not aware of that," Woods said.

Government studies have shown that up to 2 percent of household trash is considered toxic. People throw away everything from flashlight batteries and disposable printer cartridges to household cleaners and insecticides.

"It is not just one thing, it is all these things," Woods said.

Woods is no fan of America's disposable culture or of landfills in general, but argues if we are going to continue acting this way, the least the parish can do is to accept as little trash as possible.

On the other hand, many others consider the plan a relatively painless way to generate the money needed to upgrade parish roads.

They point out the landfill has been accepting about 350 tons a year of household trash from Evangeline Parish for years, for which it is paid about \$350,000 a year. Whenever that money builds up to a certain amount, the landfill doles it out to the parish and city governments for special road or trash-related projects.

While not endorsing the plan, Martin has argued the landfill can handle a great deal more waste without straining its resources.

He said the landfill already has the equipment in place to handle an increased volume of trash and enough permitted land to last for decades, with hundreds of adjoining acres that could be permitted if more is needed.

"There are a lot of positives to this. We need to look at this as a business," said District 13 Councilman Gary Courville.

Because this public hearing is expected to draw a large audience, the council will be holding it in the large courtroom on the top floor of the St. Landry Parish Courthouse rather than in its regular meeting room.

The proposal is one of several the council is debating to fund what has been called a \$100 million backlog of road repair and replacement needs for the parish's 1,000 miles of blacktop and gravel roads.

The council has previously said it hopes to put one or more plans before the voters in this fall's elections.