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Renewable-energy plant debuts in north San Jose

Facility -- the largest in the world to use dry anaerobic-digestion technology -- has implications for Palo Alto

by Jocelyn Dong

A facility that can turn people's food scraps and yard trimmings into energy and compost opened in north San Jose Nov. 22, and some Palo Alto leaders are hailing it as an encouraging sign that the city might be able to build one, too.

The low-lying, concrete-and-steel structure sits atop 23 acres of San Jose's former landfill, next to the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge off Highway 237. It is the world's largest plant to employ a technology called "dry-fermentation anaerobic digestion," according to Zero Waste Energy Development Company, which built the plant.

Using bacteria and an oxygen-deprived environment, the process breaks down matter so that it releases a gas, methane, that can be used for electricity and auto fuel. The remaining waste is treated, turning it into compost.

"We're doing what nature does, very efficiently and in a controlled way," Eric Herbert, CEO of Zero Waste Energy, said at the grand opening. "What takes nature years, we're doing in a matter of days."

Two years ago, Palo Alto voters agreed to set aside 10 acres in the Baylands as the potential site for a facility that would convert the city's organic waste -- the refuse that is neither recyclable nor considered garbage -- into energy and compost. At the time, proponents of Measure E cited anaerobic digestion as a promising technology.

In early 2014, Palo Alto staff is scheduled to update the City Council on plans for the Baylands site. The city has been reviewing proposals from local waste-management companies to build the Baylands waste-to-energy operation, or otherwise handle the city's organic waste. Staff is expected to provide an analysis of the bids, including their financial feasibility.

Unlike San Jose, Palo Alto has asked for plans to also treat the city's sewage sludge, or "biosolids." Handling that waste has been a point of contention between supporters and opponents of a Baylands facility, as has the desire to build a plant in Palo Alto rather than drive the organic waste to another city.

In concept, the San Jose plant could take and process Palo Alto's food and yard waste, according to Emily Hanson, director of business development and communications for Zero Waste Energy and GreenWaste of Palo Alto, a related firm that hauls the city's refuse.

"We would love to accept Palo Alto's waste," Hanson said of the new plant, which now processes the City of San Jose's commercial refuse.

Currently, GreenWaste takes Palo Alto's food scraps and yard trimmings to Gilroy, where its turned into compost, minus the methane.

GreenWaste's contract with Palo Alto is set to expire in 2017, with possible one-year extensions, she said.

GreenWaste of Palo Alto has already submitted a bid to handle the city's future organic waste, Hanson said. It doesn't propose building a facility in the Baylands but would plan to continue processing food and

yard waste in Gilroy. The bid includes the option to use the new San Jose waste-to-energy facility instead. GreenWaste has partnered with a separate firm that would handle the city's biosolids.

Palo Alto Councilman Marc Berman, who toured the new facility, said he's taking a wait-and-see attitude regarding the San Jose plant's implication for Palo Alto's plans.

"It is both a sign that the concept works (and could work in Palo Alto) and that there is a viable alternative for Palo Alto to export its food scraps and yard trimmings, but not biowaste," Berman said. "At the same time, it's important to note that this is just one model (dry fermentation anaerobic digestion), and Palo Alto's request-for-proposal invites proposals for other types as well.

"For me personally, it's a great opportunity to see exactly how such a facility would look and work," Berman said. "Of course, this was just the grand opening. It will be even more informative to see how things go over the first 4-6 months in operation at the facility as we're deciding what the best path forward is for Palo Alto."

Councilwoman Liz Kniss also attended the opening and emphasized local voters' desire for Palo Alto to build its own plant.

"Although there may be a push to use San Jose's facility, I think the overwhelming vote two years ago indicates Palo Alto's intent to have a facility here," Kniss said.

Nonetheless, she said, "Being able to see that another city has accomplished this, seemingly successfully, will spur us forward as we make decisions regarding our own plant in the next few months."

Environmentalists who opposed and supported Measure E also toured the new plant. Former councilwoman Emily Renzel, who believes the Baylands should be preserved as a park and not host a facility, was circumspect.

"It doesn't have any direct impact on the process going on right now," she said, noting that the city already sends its yard and food waste to be composted in Gilroy.

Environmental attorney Walt Hays, who serves on a city advisory committee on the Baylands plant, called the opening "inspiring."

"We could be a regional facility as well," he said. Several firms' proposals have indicated that other cities could send their waste to a Palo Alto plant. The cities would pay for the service, so Palo Alto would receive revenue for the operations, Hays said.

Echoing an argument made during the Measure E campaign, he asserted that -- although processing food and some yard waste at the San Jose digestion plant would be possible -- the greenhouse gases produced by trucks carrying waste down there would be counterproductive.

This past January, the council voted to postpone capping 51 acres of the city's now-closed landfill at the end of Embarcadero Road (capping would place a layer of dirt on top to prevent methane and other gases from escaping). The decision to not cap 51 acres was made to allow for the best possible siting of a waste-to-energy plant, should one be financially feasible, councilmembers said at the time.

San Jose's renewable-energy plant is undergoing final preparations and by Dec. 16 will launch its operations, said Rich Cristina, president of Zero Waste Energy.