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Grassroots group blasts Erie County for hiring out-of-state company

By RICHARD PAYERCHIN , Sandusky Bureau Chief

PERKINS TOWNSHIP -- Erie County has squandered a chance to help a local business with a project that would recycle methane gas produced at the county landfill, according to a local conservative action group.

However, the Erie County Commission said the landfill gas project still is in the works and waiting for the right opportunity for

Currently, methane gas produced by decaying garbage is vented to dissipate in the atmosphere. For years, Erie County officials have pondered whether the methane created at the landfill could be contained and recycled as an energy source.

The long-running project was blasted this month by Grassroots American Values, a Firelands-area conservative action group. In a 2 1/2-page letter, the group's board questioned why the county preferred to work with an out-of-state consultant instead of a Huron-based engineering firm.

"What concerns us is that an opportunity for local private sector initiative and investment appears to have been squandered," Grassroots American Values wrote.

However, county commissioners Sparky Weilnau, Nancy McKeen and Tom Ferrell in turn signed a reply explaining their choice for the consultant and why the project could succeed.

Grassroots American Values President Milla Kette declined to comment on the issue until the group received and discussed the county commissioners' reply. She and Vice President Peg Ramm, Treasurer Wasylik and board members Tracy Enderle and Gary Steinert signed the letter.

The group argued Huron-based Engineered Process Systems three years ago joined with Shaw Environmental Group to offer a project that would collect and use methane gas produced as garbage decays in the landfill.

The project would have allowed EPS to gain expertise in a relatively new market, allowing it to provide new jobs and growth in the county. Meanwhile, two potential users, CertainTeed Corp. and EHOVE Career Center, could have upgraded their equipment to use the gas, according to the letter from Grassroots American Values.

Instead, the Erie County Commission and its Department of Environmental Services chose to work with Ameresco Inc. of Framingham, Mass. The company has an exclusive right to work on the project, said the Grassroots American Values group.

"Why does Erie County tout their out-of-state vendor to other Erie County entities instead of trying to assist their local experts in their business?" the group wrote. "It appears Erie County ignores and thwarts EPS in their efforts to work with their clients, EHOVE and CertainTeed, to develop the application of landfill gas to energy. Is the county in the business of disrupting free market activities?"

In selecting a vendor, EPS's proposal appeared to score similarly to Ameresco's, but that was "because of a significant number of votes awarded based on local preference, without which, the scoring wouldn't have been so close," the commissioners said.

The out-of-state company was chosen because of its technical experience, the county commissioners said.

"EPS, a firm with no experience in developing landfill gas projects, was offered an opportunity to work with an organization that received the highest recognition of the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Landfill Methane Outreach Program. EPS representatives and county commissioners replied.

"In summary, we too are disappointed that after 10 years of effort, the county has not yet succeeded in developing a project with a clear end user," the county commissioners wrote. "We have worked diligently to find end users; in fact we originally approached EHOVE and CertainTeed about the potential to utilize landfill gas.

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"There are, however, other potential end users that we are working with to make this a successful project," Weinau, McKeen at wrote. "It is only a matter of time until the right opportunity arrives."



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