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The Old City Dumps Aren't What They Used To Be

BY KERRY JACKSON

Nearly two decades ago, before “ban everything” fever was sweeping through California, San Francisco committed to eliminating a staple of human progress: the modern landfill.

The idea, concocted in 2002, was to reach a “zero waste” existence by 2020, which “means that we send zero discards to the landfill or high-temperature destruction,” says the San Francisco Department of the Environment.

“The city and county of San Francisco believes achieving zero waste is possible.”

An environmental code was developed in 2003, then six years later the Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance, which requires everyone in the city to separate recyclables, compostables, and landfill garbage, was passed. Noncompliance is a finable offense.

In addition to mandatory recycling and composting, San Francisco also requires “any site that generates more than 40 cubic yards of waste per week to complete waste audits every three years,” says Waste Dive. Those that fail are “required to hire on-site facilitators at their own expense for one year.” More than 400 sites are subject to the reviews, as well as the \$1,000-per-day fines that can be levied on those not meeting the standard.

Despite the efforts and expectations, Politico reported last month that San Francisco is “nowhere close to that goal.” After falling for years, the amount of garbage being sent to landfills has been

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growing, even as officials have tried to push residents into generating less waste by cutting the size of curbside containers by half, from 32 gallons to 16.

Given the costs and added labor required, why even pursue “zero waste”? Are there practical reasons to eliminate landfill use?

Not according to author and journalist John Tierney. In 1996, he wrote a lengthy essay in the *New York Times Magazine* under the headline “Recycling is Garbage.” It generated more hate mail than any *New York Times* article ever had. Which is no surprise, since he convincingly made the case that the recycling process was wasteful, and showed it was both a costly and unproductive exercise. He also debunked claims the country was running out of landfill space.

“All the trash generated by Americans for the next 1,000 years would fit on one-tenth of 1% percent of the land available for grazing,” he wrote in a 2015 follow-up.

This continues to be the case today. From 2010 to 2018, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in July, “36 landfills in California expanded and a new one opened.” Meanwhile, San Diego, which had also adopted a zero-waste policy, is adding capacity to the Miramar Landfill.

Because modern landfills, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, are “well-engineered,” “designed to protect the environment from contaminants,” regularly monitored, and “must meet stringent design, operation and closure requirements,” the land isn’t spoiled for future use. No longer the city dumps of another century, landfills are frequently reclaimed for other purposes, “typically covered with grass and converted to parkland,” Tierney wrote in 2015. Both the Freshkills Park on Staten Island and

the facility where the United States Open tennis tournament is played were built on the sites of old landfills, the latter never having “the linings and other environmental safeguards required today.”

Some forward thinkers believe today’s refuse will be tomorrow’s commodities. Landfills will “prove profitable — both financially and for the environment,” says *Science Daily*, reporting on a study of out Sweden’s Linnaeus University, because “much of the environmentally hazardous waste” in them “can be recycled as energy or reused as valuable raw materials in different industries.”

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Gas emissions from decomposing material in landfills are already being used to produce energy. In fact, California leads the country in this “renewable” resource, with 81 landfills across

the state generating electricity. And unlike wind and solar, landfill energy is not intermittent but constant. Bloom Energy of San Jose reports that “if all of the landfill gas in California were captured and converted into electricity using highly efficient, non-combustion technology ... it could power 700,000 homes — roughly a city the size of San Diego.”

Producing energy from landfill gas reduces operational costs, making landfills, which Tierney calls “the easiest and cheapest solution for trash,” even more cost-effective. This is especially significant as growing recycling costs have left cities with little choice but to again send all their trash to landfills, and consumer recycling centers have closed across the state.

Chasing zero waste stirs warm feelings in Blue cities. But efforts to eliminate landfills are simply an overdose of green. The buzz is nice, but it has no long-term practicality.

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