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WHAT WORKS

Minneapolis Gets Trashed

How trash is transforming American cities.

By CALEB HANNAN | August 20, 2015

Mark Peterson/Redux

Pick a spot on the map in the United States and you're likely to come away fairly disappointed at that city's ability to do anything sustainable with its trash. Take arguably the country's most progressive city, San Francisco, which has set itself the goal of becoming the first "zero waste" city in America by 2020: Even as its recycling and composting efforts have gained traction, leading residents to carefully separate their coffee grounds from their aluminum soda cans, it hauls much of its trash to landfills in nearby counties—and would have sent the remaining refuse all the way to Nevada had its original plan not been shot down.

The sheer volume of trash that Americans throw out—we represent 5 percent of the world's population yet produce 30 percent of its waste—overwhelms the valiant efforts of most municipalities. Nationwide, recycling rates have stalled over

the past decade after rising steadily throughout the ’90s. Curbside recycling is too expensive for some communities.

That challenge and unhappy outcome, repeated daily in cities across the country, is what makes it so amazing to breathe deeply as you walk the streets outside of the Minnesota Twins' relatively new stadium, Target Field, in downtown Minneapolis.

Incredibly, it smells just fine.

You would never know that you’re standing next to what is arguably the nation’s most successful trash incinerator, a massive 12-acre project that has emerged as an unlikely, low-profile resident of one of the city’s trendiest neighborhoods. Just blocks away is Bachelor Farmer, a nouveau Scandinavian restaurant that has emerged as one of the nation’s hottest restaurants and hosted Barack Obama for dinner when the president passed through town in 2012. Loft condos nearby sell for a half-million and above. There’s a Caribou Coffee right next door, which itself is across from the renovated historic building that houses the city’s top architectural and advertising firms. And assuming things break right, all of these offices will one day be powered by that incinerator, which gobbles up 1,000 tons of trash a day—some of it from the surrounding North Loop neighborhood.

The Hennepin Energy Recovery Center, better known as the HERC, has emerged as the centerpiece of Minneapolis’s own push to be carbon-neutral by 2030, as Minnesota’s largest city looks to vault itself into the world’s top tier of sustainable cities. In doing so, it hopes to join places like Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm that have a long reputation of balancing the environment and human impact. It’s an ambitious goal for the Midwestern city of 400,000, but one that Minneapolis hopes to achieve by transforming its residents’ relationship to their own trash, and one that it—and 17 other global cities, including Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and San Francisco—all joined together to announce in 2014 during a meeting in Copenhagen when they created the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance pact.

Carbon neutral; zero waste; sustainable. These are the buzzwords of an environmentally-conscious, not to mention terrified, time. The push to limit, reuse or even recapture some energy from the things we no longer think we need has led some cities to push themselves toward hopeful, some might say unlikely, goals.

In Minneapolis' case, though, it all began long before Al Gore's alarmist documentaries ushered in the modern focus on carbon and climate change. It began nearly a generation ago, in 1985, with Randy Johnson's headline-grabbing trip to Europe.

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HERC was born of an earlier environmental movement. Prior to today's obsession with sustainability, many American cities were much more concerned about a more basic environmental problem—the festering sores of a century of the Industrial Age.

It was 1985 and Randy Johnson, then (as now) a commissioner for Hennepin, the county that surrounds Minneapolis, was leading the charge for the city's newest, most controversial—and least tourist-friendly—landmark.

First elected not long after Love Canal horrified the nation, Johnson and the county he served were eager to find some better way of dealing with the vast amounts of trash the city produced and shipped to faraway landfills. A former attorney with the Federal Election Commission, Johnson's buttoned-up job papered over a bohemian streak: early in their marriage, he and his wife sold nearly all their belongings and set off on a trip hitchhiking through Europe, North Africa and Turkey. Johnson knew that at the time Minnesota had over 100 moldering, decomposing pits full of waste. And though the state may have never had its Cuyahoga-on-fire moment of environmental reckoning, the landfills leaked often enough to offend politicians like him, who considered the issue of water quality a sacred matter in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, and especially so in Minneapolis, divided as it is by the Mississippi River.

Looking back on it now, Johnson says there are a number of reasons why he became, in his words, "the trash guy." As a Republican he was in the political minority, without a caucus and mostly left to find his own pet issues. When he was first elected in 1979, the state Legislature had just mandated that counties find a way to limit landfilling. Most had ignored the order, but Johnson found something he could burrow into and began poring over federal and state regulations, coming to the conclusion that waste-to-energy was the best alternative. There also was one ulterior motive, too.

As a kid, Johnson and his dad were often admonished by his mom when they came home from trips to the dump. "She used to tell us not to bring home more

than we brought," he says. The landfill issue, then, was Johnson's way of itching a scratch for scavenging he'd had since childhood. It gave him an excuse to learn about Minneapolis' trash ecosystem, and therefore an excuse to wake up early and shadow the city's garbage haulers. Trips that inevitably began with his wife giving him the same warning his mother had years before: "Don't bring anything back," he says she told him.

Johnson, for better and worse, became the face of HERC. For weeks in the mid-'80s, he and a few other county commissioners led the local nightly news as they traveled from Germany to Sweden to Austria to see what it looked like when trash was turned into electricity. In keeping with Hennepin, and Minnesota at-large's, history of good governance, the trips were funded entirely by the companies bidding for the project. "Some of these vendors said we couldn't see their plants because they were overseas," Johnson says. "And I said, 'That's OK, I'll go.' My German back then was still pretty good. And I was able to muddle my way through Sweden."

Even with a tremendous amount of due diligence, he and his fellow supporters were vilified. "[Protesters] put on Hazmat suits and paraded through our office," he recalls. The first day cranes appeared on the job site, some of the more limber members of the opposition clambered up to the top and unveiled banners. The project may have been completed on time, under budget, and—because this was progressive Minnesota—using only union labor, that didn't stop someone, Johnson says, from spiking the first batch of burned trash.

On its first air quality test, the incinerator failed and registered distressingly high numbers. As Johnson recalls, "The speculation was that someone snuck in a large amount of batteries." Though that rumor was never confirmed, what is true is that in the 25 years since HERC started burning greater Minneapolis' trash, the facility has never come close to going over the strict pollution control limits it exceeded on that very first test.

Johnson was told a lot of things about what HERC would do to Minneapolis. The facility was separated from downtown by only the width of a freeway, but it may as well have been in Wisconsin. The only sign of life nearby was the Ford Center, a 10-story monument to the logistical genius of the car company's founder that had once pumped out Model T's, but in the intervening decades had, like everything else in the neighborhood, gone to seed. "There was nothing there," Johnson recalls.