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Public-Private Partnerships Are Helping Keep La Crosse County Green and Clean

Public-private partnerships, or P3s, are attracting interest in Wisconsin and around the US as an alternative approach to developing and operating critical infrastructure. While there are almost endless variations in the structure of P3s, the approach is generally defined as a long-term agreement between a government unit and the private sector to share the risks and rewards of delivering an essential public service.

In La Crosse County, multiple public-private partnerships for delivering solid waste and recycling services go back decades.

“Since its inception in the mid-1970s, the La Crosse County Solid Waste Department has operated successfully by working hand-in-hand with private sector partners on waste-to-energy, beneficial use of landfill gas, landfill operations and more,” says County Solid Waste Director Henry Koch. “The arrangements are highly effective and allow us to provide financially sound, sustainable services that we could not accomplish without private sector engagement.”

Of its multiple public-private partnerships, the County’s waste-to-energy relationship with Xcel Energy is most critical to its solid waste operations.

Xcel owns and operates a 28-megawatt combination electrical generating plant and resource recovery facility on French Island near downtown La Crosse. The plant’s two generating units burn processed municipal solid waste (also known as refuse-derived fuel or RDF) and wood waste to produce electrical energy.

Since 1988, the County and Xcel have worked together via a negotiated contract which establishes specific tonnages of municipal solid waste from the region to be delivered to the Xcel facility for processing into boiler fuel rather than being landfilled. In late 2016, an extension of the agreement was approved by the La Crosse County Board and Xcel that will take the partnership well into the future, with options for additional extensions.

Koch notes multiple benefits to the agreement.

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“First, we are conserving landfill space. If material processed at the Xcel French Island facility were to be landfilled, the County would need to consider significant expansion or siting of a new landfill. These are costly and controversial efforts which we can now avoid.

“Next, the waste-to-energy program provides renewable, locally produced electricity for more than 10,000 homes in the region. The partnership also protects air quality locally by minimizing the use of CO2 emitting trucks for long-distance waste hauling,” he says.

Enhanced resource recovery is another key benefit. The County and Xcel have worked together to recover ferrous and non-ferrous metals from the waste stream. More than 800,000 pounds of this material has been recovered for recycling by a contracted vendor

“Security and stability in our solid waste system is enhanced by the partnership as well,” he notes.

“Unlike some other counties, we will avoid situations which put residents and businesses at risk due to ambiguous solid waste management programs.”

Koch points to another public-private partnership that has reaped benefits.

“In 2009, we completed a study to determine how to beneficially utilize methane gas generated at our landfill site. Developing a gas-to-energy project with an external partner was identified as the best option,” he says.

After a rigorous vetting process, the County accepted a proposal from Gundersen Health System to cooperatively develop the project. Gundersen, which operates a health care campus just across I-90 from the landfill complex, had experience with renewable energy projects and has established aggressive sustainability goals that include maximizing the use of renewable or alternative energy sources such as landfill gas. As a partner, the County was able to access funding and tax incentives available to Gundersen that weren't available to the County to implement the system.

The resulting landfill gas-to-energy system, which came online in 2012, cleans and transports methane gas from the landfill and pipes it under the highway to Gundersen's complex. There it is converted to generator-quality fuel that provides heat and power to the entire campus. Enough energy is created to make Gundersen's campus the only one in US to be 100 percent energy independent.

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“It’s a great example of how a public-private partnership can work,” says Koch. “Our expertise with landfill gas, combined with Gundersen’s needs and interests resulted in a win for both.”

The Solid Waste Department’s P3 relationships don’t end there. Contracts with St. Joseph Construction for landfill operations; Mathy Construction for beneficial reuse of roofing shingles; Green Earth Composting for beneficial reuse of compostable material; Dynamic Recycling for de-constructed electronic waste recycling; and private waste hauling companies all contribute to the successful delivery of solid waste services.

“P3s aren’t new to us,” says Koch. “They are a proven effective long-term approach for accomplishing our mission. We will continue to look for opportunities to pursue relationships with private sector partners.”

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