OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

November 5, 2026

Dear Councilmembers,

Before you vote next week on the two resolutions regarding disposal of the county's solid waste, I wanted to reach out with information and a request.

I urge you to vote to close the incinerator, and below I lay out the reasons why. **However, if you are not ready to vote to close, I urge you to gather more information.**

As you know, we are at a crossroads. The status quo is not an option.

Keeping the incinerator open will require hundreds of millions of dollars in upgrading or rebuilding the facility as well as finding a new location that is not located in a poor, minority community for ash disposal, which about 25-30% of the original waste volume.

In addition to environmental and racial equity concerns for investing hundreds of millions in a new incinerator, **these investments would lock the County into enormous long-term financial obligations, regardless of how successful we become at reducing waste.**

In effect, we would be committing hundreds of millions of future taxpayer dollars to preserve a system whose economic viability depends on continuing to generate the very waste we should be working to eliminate.

I want to give you a sense of what we can do if we close the incinerator and free up capital and operating funds to move Montgomery County away from a throw-away society.

Either choice will require long-haul of trash in the short-term, whether it's a rebuild of the incinerator or a move toward Advanced Waste Processing. I have heard concerns about transportation and trucks. In the short term – for either choice - the trash would likely have to go by truck, but it eventually could go by rail. Please note that even keeping the incinerator open would require long-distance hauling during the facility's major refurbishment or rebuild.

Additionally, we are actively working to reduce truck traffic to the transfer station by requiring, as of November 2, that construction and demolition (C&D) debris go to alternative sites. The trucks with large C&D loads and the county trucks taking the C&D to landfills have disappeared.

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Furthermore, keeping the incinerator open beyond 2031 also greatly delays the county's ability to implement countywide composting, increases costs for a composting facility, and raises the possibility to truck the compost rather than transport it by rail. The Sugarloaf Citizens Association, which has legal authority, will not allow food scraps at the existing facility unless the incinerator is shut down. The county will then either have to find another location for a facility, which will cost more and may have to use trucks rather than rail, or give up on countywide composting.

My goal is to offer the Council a broader perspective on what is possible. There is a path from where we are today to a more comprehensive waste management system that continually reduces trash, increases recycling, and recovers valuable resources.

I recognize the Council has held multiple sessions examining parts of this decision. What is missing is a serious examination of technologies and solutions already operating successfully elsewhere, which I have seen with my own eyes. A decision of this magnitude deserves more than a presentation from the incinerator's operator.

Below is information on systems in operation now that I have visited and **that can help us continually reduce the amount of trash and increase our recycling.**

Below is information on three facilities using different technologies to divert more than half of the trash. And there are more out there both in the US and elsewhere.

1) GreenWaste, San Jose, California, recovers up to 75% from the trash

One of the facilities I visited, GreenWaste in San Jose, California, recycles on-site and **recovers up to 75% of the mixed solid waste (trash) on its tipping floor.** 75%! If we did that, the amount of trash we'd send to a landfill would be less than what we send right now.

Here's a screen shot from their website:

Operating at 90 tons per hour, this facility will recover up to 75% of the material it processes.



They have a 4-minute video that shows their process: https://www.greenwaste.com/facilities/greenwaste-san-jose-material-recovery-facility/#garbage-mixed-materials-msw

The video explains how the trash goes through multiple sorters, some with AI pickers, some that sort by weight (the light parts float), some that sort by size (the smallest drop through screens), and some that sort by magnets. There are people in a few places who also provide additional quality control. And it is important to note that they have separate recycling pick-up, so they are working with trash compositions similar to ours.

2) Sevier Solid Waste, Pigeon Forge, Tennessee diverts 70% of waste through composting and recycling

Sevier Solid Waste is using different technology to recover plastics and other recyclables. All the trash is fed into huge rotary drums that they call digestors that transform bags of trash into a dirt-like material with metal and plastics pulled out and the remainder made into compost. The trash is inside the rotary drums turning for three days.

You can read about Sevier here: https://www.seviersolidwaste.com/



The photo to the left shows where it starts - the bags of trash, which get transferred to the huge rotary drums shown in the photo below.

These rotary drums turn for three days, and it gets quite hot inside. At the end of three days, it is dumped out of the drums, and it looks like the dirt-like pile shown in the photo below on the left





When the trash comes out of the rotary drums, it looks like the pile on the left. It then goes through a further process, which removes plastic and metals. After that it is aerated in windrows for 28 days, and the result (the pile on the right) can be used for compost.



The photo to the left shows the metal "shaken" out of the dirt-like substance that is on the left in the photo above - small copy here:



You can watch a video about the process here:
https://youtu.be/EfdNcIFUaqE?si=Nt1bBFGTI_kSLCZC

3) AMP, in Portsmouth, Va. Diverts up to 60% diversion of municipal solid waste

When I visited Portsmouth, they explained that their contract only required 50% of the waste to be diverted but they have the capability to do more as their website points out.

Here's their website: https://ampsortation.com/products/municipal-solid-waste. And you can watch a brief video that shows a little how their system works. They also note that they can build a system that is compact and can fit in as little as 10,000 square feet.

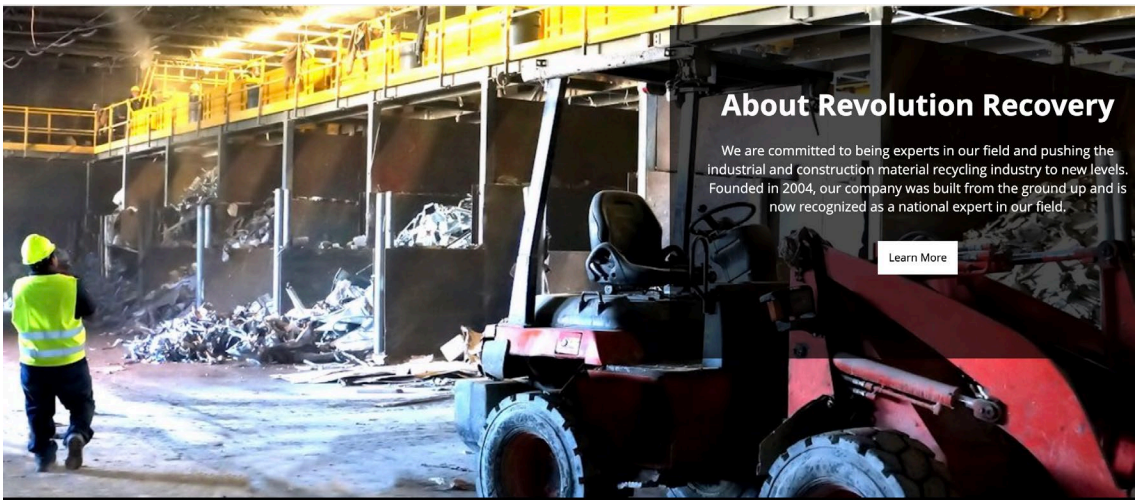
https://youtu.be/UM-jjEVRPsc?si=zT5xm_ACh5xmIciU



Additionally, two facilities I visited had organic digesters that produced compost and captured methane. One used methane to power electric turbines, and the other used it to power its trash trucks.

Even more technology is possible and available. I also visited Revolution Recovery in Pennsylvania, which currently works with clients to recycle their Construction and Demolition debris.

You can learn more about them here: https://revolutionrecovery.com/



Choose the path to waste reduction and increased recycling and diversion

So, you can see, various technologies exist to drastically reduce our trash, diverting and recovering it. These technologies can help move us away from being a throwaway society. These are three existing options I have seen, and there are more.

As you may know, we issued a request for proposals (RFP) to implement an advanced waste processing system. The deadline for submissions has closed, and now the proposals are being reviewed as part of the RFP process. Because of the nature of the procurement process, only the designated members of the review committee are allowed to review the proposals and know the details; even I as County Executive cannot see the proposals. However, the reviewers must evaluate the proposals based on the criteria that includes proven ability to sort the waste and recover as much as possible.

This is what we should be doing, and yet, we cannot do this, financially, if the incinerator stays open because, as I said earlier, for it to stay open will cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

As I've shown above, advanced waste processing helps greatly reduce trash. We can also continue and improve our efforts upfront to reduce the trash.

If we choose this path, we put the right incentives in place, landfilling (which is paid for on a per ton basis) less and less as advanced waste processing is implemented.

By contrast, if we commit to keeping the incinerator open beyond 2031– which is a 20-30 year commitment, not 5 or 10 years - we take on huge fixed costs for 20-30 years. Those costs will not go down even if the amount of trash goes down.

We cannot have both advanced waste processing and the incinerator. It does not work financially, and it does not provide the opportunity to commit to zero waste with maximum recycling, repurposing and reuse of these materials.

This is an exciting moment – we have the possibility of truly moving Montgomery County toward Zero Waste, using tried and tested technologies, policies, and practices. Please – I urge you – vote to close the incinerator and move along the path to reducing our trash and increasing our diversion and recycling. And if you are not ready to commit to closing the incinerator, please take the time to get all the information you need.

My staff and I are happy to discuss this further with you.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Marc Elrich
County Executive