

Balked By The Boundary Barrier

# Why Plans For A New Incinerator Turned Out To Be Garbage

By Peter Marudas

The six-year-old dreams, hopes and plans of Metropolitan area officials for building an incinerator for the joint improvement of trash disposal in Baltimore city and Baltimore county have turned out to be a lot of garbage.

City and county officials now admit, a survey shows, that they are no closer to agreement on plans for building such an incinerator than they were six years ago, when the idea was first broached publicly by former Mayor Grady, in May, 1960.

Intensive discussions, studies and negotiations over the past three years have produced so many complications that the idea of building a joint incinerator has been shelved until at least next year.

This is the story why plans, once heralded as "a pioneering venture in metropolitan area cooperation," or togetherness, have figuratively gone up in smoke.

## Major, Minor Factors

A number of major and minor factors helped to snuff out the dream of the planners. Three of the major ones are:

1. The boundary barrier is the imaginary line which separates what is called Baltimore county from what is called Baltimore city.
2. Factionalism inside Baltimore city, particularly in South Baltimore's Sixth district.
3. Factionalism inside the city Administration itself in which Charles L. Benton, Jr., Baltimore's budget director, opposed the plan for a joint incinerator in favor of a proposal that Baltimore city build its own new incinerator in South Baltimore.

To understand why the plan for a joint incinerator collapsed it is only necessary to go back and trace the interrelationship between major and minor arguments that developed over the past eighteen months.

## Plans Accepted

Plans then were advanced and accepted by both Mayor McKeldin and County Executive Spiro T. Agnew, calling for the county

to build an incinerator in its Patapsco Flats area for use by both jurisdictions. The county would operate the facility with the city paying for use on a tonnage basis.

Both sides exchanged proposals and appeared working toward a joint venture until Mr. Benton entered the picture.

The city finance director not only argued strongly against participation with the county, but actively lobbied—and still is—for a new incinerator in South Baltimore.

To sweeten the proposal, Mr. Benton also proposed the city remove the obsolete Reedbird avenue incinerator and adjacent outdoor dumps, both long-time irritants to residents in the Curtis Bay-Brooklyn-Cherry Hill area.

The financial director's idea dampened hopes for city-county cooperation, but more important, it set off a second controversy between South Baltimore factions for and against a new incinerator.

Thus, while rival South Baltimore groups battle it out, Mr. Agnew, a prime mover in incinerator cooperation, now plays the role of a bystander.

Earlier this month, both he and Mayor McKeldin virtually admitted the entire incinerator question was out of their hands, hopelessly snarled by the South Baltimore battle.

This despair was indeed a far cry from October, 1963, when both men enthusiastically agreed to study joint problems of refuse disposal.

And it was an almost complete departure from statements issued a year later when Mayor McKeldin and Mr. Agnew announced agreement on an exchange of incinerator sites.

## 25 Acres Of Land

Under that agreement, the city was to lease the county 25 acres at the Back River Sewage Treatment plant for construction of an incinerator. In return, Baltimore county agreed to make available its landfill dump south of Patapsco avenue for garbage disposal.

This preliminary agreement was later refined calling for the county to build the Patapsco Flats incinerator with the city using it

on a tonnage basis. Most officials now admit those were the "golden days" of incinerator cooperation. Since then the trend has been downward with city-county efforts at a standstill and the prospects dim for further negotiations.

Meanwhile the waste piles up. Baltimore's two obsolete incinerators labor to process tons of refuse they were never built to handle. To meet this increasing load, the Department of Sanitation must often resort to open dump burning.

## No Less Promising

In the county, the situation is no less promising. A burgeoning population is eating up land previously available for land-fill refuse disposal while producing greater quantities of waste.

Both city and county need new incinerators but where and how is the problem.

Mr. Benton, arch-advocate of the "go-it-alone" approach, claims the county's incinerator plans are unclear and fiscally unsound. He argues that a city-owned and operated incinerator in South Baltimore would be tailored to Baltimore's needs and firmly under control of the local administration.

Mr. Agnew and his aides differ, charging the finance director with "sabotaging" metropolitan cooperation. They emphasize their proposal is sound and will help the city to avoid heavy construction investment for a new incinerator.

Despite the best of intentions, however, prospects for city-county joint participation on an incinerator grow bleaker by the day.

## City Has No Choice

This apparently leaves the city no choice but to build a new plant in South Baltimore, which is easier said than done.

Opposition to a new incinerator there is apparently vocal and unalterable, despite Mr. Benton's tireless efforts to convert opponents to his views.

Dominic M. Leone and William J. Myers, Sixth district councilmen, along with many residents are categorically opposed to a new incinerator and want the Reedbird facility out.

"We want our cake and eat it, too," commented Mr. Leone.

"South Baltimore has had an incinerator for nearly 30 years. Let someone else take it now. My people don't want another incinerator and that's it."

Echoing this view is State Senator William L. Bishop Hodges (D.,

Sixth), South Baltimore's most powerful political leader. Mr. Hodges, whose position has wavered between qualified support to a new incinerator and all-out opposition is for the moment opposed.

## 600 Signatures

One of the most vigorous incinerator opponents is Mrs. Kay O. Johnson, an articulate Brooklyn resident, who has gathered an estimated 600 signatures opposed to any trash-burning plant.

She maintains the new incinerator is needed in Northwest Baltimore, not in South Baltimore. As proof, Mrs. Johnson cites a 1962 study made for the city by the consulting firm of Whitman, Requardt and Associates.

The consultants' report categorically stated a new incinerator was needed in the city's northwest section to eliminate uneconomical hauling costs to South and East Baltimore.

It even proposed five suggested incinerator sites scattered throughout the northwest area. Bernard L. Werner, city public works director, claims all the sites were rejected as unsuitable.

Mrs. Johnson explained she is not opposed to elimination of the Reedbird incinerator, but "not at the price of a new incinerator."

## Other Use For Land

"What's to stop the city from building a new incinerator and then eating nearby land for dumping purposes just like they've done around Reedbird," she added.

Mrs. Johnson contends that promises by city officials to build a park around the new incinerator are lures "to fool the people."

As ardently as Mrs. Johnson and others are opposed to a new incinerator, other South Baltimore civic leaders view it as a sorely needed project.

Mrs. Sarah Bundy, president of the Cherry Hill Co-Ordinating Council, explains that neighborhood residents have reached the end of their patience.



"We need a new incinerator now," Mrs. Bundy declared. "We need it because the Reedbird plant must be removed immediately and open-dump burning eliminated."

#### Poisons Atmosphere

She explained that the present incinerator borders on the Cherry Hill swimming pool and recreation area poisoning the atmosphere with its exhaust.

"If that isn't bad enough, our people cannot wash their clothes because of the soot and dirt coming from both city and private dumps," Mrs. Johnson complained. "Rats and stray dogs which feed on waste in the dumps run around the area and on some hot summer nights, you can't open your windows because of the smell."

"We are 100 per cent behind Mr. Benton's proposal to build a new incinerator, remove Reedbird and build a new park."

Agreeing with Mrs. Bundy is Benjamin A. Poe, director of the sanitation committee for the Southern District Police Relations Community Committee, a group favoring a new incinerator.

Mr. Poe, a retired plant supervisor, strongly advocates a new incinerator for South Baltimore. His enthusiasm is so great, he arranged for a vacation trip last summer to inspect a modern incinerator plant in Miami, Fla.

#### "A Modern Plant"

Summing up his position, Mr. Poe recently said: "I feel that in each section of the city, we the residents make the garbage and trash and we should have to dispose of it."

"Our aim in South Baltimore should be to dismantle the Reedbird incinerator, replacing it with a modern plant and then try to redevelop both sides of the Patapsco River."

Differing sharply with Mrs. Johnson who takes a dim view of "modern" incinerators, Mr. Poe claims the Miami plant located in the city's downtown disposes of rubber tires, washing machines and refrigerators.

In addition to Mr. Benton, incinerator proponents have received some official support from Councilman John J. Hines (D., Sixth) and Delegate Harry J. McGuirk.

Both leaders are unhappy with any incinerator in South Baltimore but seem inclined to accept a new facility provided the Reedbird plant is replaced by a park.

#### \$4 Million Bond Issue

To achieve this goal, Mr. McGuirk is supporting a \$4,000,000 incinerator bond issue scheduled for this November's ballot. Mr. Benton said this money will supplement \$2,150,000 already on hand for a 1,000-ton South Baltimore incinerator.

The bond issue stipulates, however, that if a new incinerator is built, the Reedbird facility must be removed.

Currently, only the most optimistic would doubt that metropolitan incinerator cooperation has been shelved.

Because of Mr. Benton's efforts, the incinerator issue has shifted from the city-county axis to a question involving opposing South Baltimore groups.

County hopes have received a further jolt with reports that many city councilmen, including Sixth district representatives, are opposed to metropolitan cooperation largely because of Mr. Benton's arguments.

#### Support Is Paramount

The council's support is paramount since it must approve any long-term agreement with the county or any South Baltimore site.

What this means, according to metropolitan observers, is that incinerator progress has been brought to a halt.

The situation will probably stay that way until November when the incinerator bond issue will come for a vote. Perhaps with this money in its pocket, the city can convince enough South Baltimoreans to accept a new incinerator.

If this fails, then some predict the city may be forced to dicker again with the Agnew Administration, which then may be in no mood for metropolitan cooperation.



THE REEDBIRD AVENUE incinerator and its outdoor dumps have long been recognized as being obsolete. Yet, plans to replace them have been shelved for at least another year by arguments among city and county officials and residents of South Baltimore.

