



## **Around Town: A Familiar Stench**

Published: 06/06/2009



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Around Town Columnists

CONSIDER IT A BLAST FROM THE PAST - a reeking blast of foul air, that is. And it's blowing in Cobb's direction - (but only figuratively, thank heavens) - all the way from Perth, Australia, where a composting plant built by Bedminster BioEnergy is raising the same kind of stink with neighbors as the plant it built in Cobb did back in the 1990s.

In fact, the Perth plant is modeled on the Cobb plant.

Then-Cobb Commission Chairman Bill Byrne originally envisioned the Bedminster plant as a way of reducing the amount of garbage the county sent to landfills. Unfortunately, the \$26 million Cobb plant was poorly engineered and spewed noxious fumes from the day it opened in 1994.

(In retrospect, it probably was a bad sign for our plant that the MDJ photographer who covered the grand opening, Barry Shapiro, felt compelled to hurry home at midday and change clothes because the ones he had worn to the event smelled so putrid afterward. He also noted that the lunchtime "spread" of Varsity hot dogs provided by the county for the opening went almost untouched due to the overpowering smell of putrefaction in the building.)

Byrne had chosen to build the plant on what is now County Services Parkway, rather than in a more remote area. That meant the sulfurous fumes it generated would routinely drift into subdivisions just hundreds of yards away, making life miserable

for residents. The commission was slow to respond to the complaints, initially suggesting the residents might have to take what amounted to a "like or lump it" approach for the good of the county. But the fumes were so intolerable - and the publicity for the plant and commission so unfavorable - that the county finally insisted on a redesign of the plant. Even Byrne ultimately lost patience with the plant operators, at one point characterizing them as "stupid people doing stupid things."

The reopening of the star-crossed facility was then delayed by a devastating fire. Cobb still owes about \$13 million on the bonds used to build the plant and has spent about \$40 million on construction and repairs to date. (The re-engineered Cobb plant no longer emits nauseous fumes, by the way.) The county was expected to ink a privatization contract Friday or Monday with Advanced Disposal of Jacksonville, Fla., to take over the plant's operation.

"We will then get a new transfer station at the current site and a regional recycling center where the compost plant now exists, which will save us about \$5 million per year," Commission Chairman Sam Olens told AT on Friday. Why privatize?

"The compost (produced by the plant) was excellent, but the cost (for us) to produce it was excessive," Olens added.

Bedminster Bio-Conversion, now known as Bedminster BioEnergy Technology, is headquartered in Dublin, Ireland. Its Web site touts its facilities in Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Japan, Canada, Australia and yes, Cobb County. The plants use aerobic digestion to separate waste into biodegradable and non-biodegradable parts.

The \$40 million Perth plant was built by a consortium of seven suburban cities there (the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council, or SMRC) and opened in 2003 in the town of Canning Vale. Its residents almost immediately noticed a pungent odor from the plant, and are irked that plant managers and government officials have long taken a "deny, deny, deny" approach to any suggestion that the plant is to blame. Residents complain the smell is so bad it wakes them up at night, even with their windows closed and air conditioners on. Local newspaper stories have featured headlines such as "Big Stink Over Smell," "Smell Sparks Health Fears" and "Corners Cut Lead to Smell" - headlines almost identical to those that ran at times in late 1990s editions of the MDJ.

The Canning Melville Community Odour Action Group has been formed to try to close the plant.

"This issue has become more than just the odour, it is the whole management of the site, the lack of accountability of those who run it and the long term cost to the ratepayers," e-mailed spokesman Rod Petterson to AT this week. "The SMRC promotes itself as green and saving tonnes of greenhouse gases by keeping rubbish out of landfills. While we all support that principle, the compost they produce in the Bedminster area does not have a market and questions are now raised about the long term effects it will have on the ground water and soil as they cannot control what the community throws away, such as pesticide, solvents, etc.

"I thought (plant) management would monitor the site, Cobb County, from where they selected the technology to identify problems, development and innovation. (But) the SMRC have either not done this or if they were aware of the problems in Cobb County, have not disclosed that to their stakeholders."

For more on that controversy, go to the Perth group's Web site, [www.cmcoag.com](http://www.cmcoag.com).