

Portsmouth, Middletown should team up on trash, consultants say

By Meaghan Wims/Daily News staff ,

12/21/2006

PORTSMOUTH - Middletown's trash concerns may be more pressing than Portsmouth's, but both towns should work together for a viable solution to handling their solid waste.

That's the word from consultant DSM Environmental Services of Ascutney, Vt., which met Tuesday night with both town councils at Portsmouth Town Hall to present its final recommendations for how the communities should handle their garbage.

"We realize the situation in the two towns is very different," DSM President Ted Seigler said. "Middletown is under the gun to close their transfer station. Portsmouth doesn't face the same pressing issue, but anyone who uses the transfer station, especially on Saturdays, can see that you're pretty maxed out."

The best option, according to DSM, is curbside trash and recycling pickup in both towns, and use of the Portsmouth transfer station as a drop-off for bulky items and yard waste and as a transfer site for haulers on their way to the Johnston landfill.

The Portsmouth transfer station, on Hedly Street, is crowded and can be dangerous for motorists and those throwing out trash, he said. "We're lucky no one's been hurt, quite frankly," Seigler said.

The Navy told Middletown about a year ago that it would not renew the town's lease for the Burma Road transfer station. The community has been considering since then how it will handle trash removal once the lease expires on Nov. 30, 2007.

DSM's survey of transfer-station users and its focus groups found residents split on whether they support curbside pickup. Many were in favor of the idea because they thought it would boost recycling rates, but they were worried the change could increase roadside dumping, Seigler said.

Middletown spends nearly \$2 million annually, and Portsmouth nearly \$1.4 million, to get rid of its solid waste. Two-thirds of Middletown residents pay for private haulers to pick up their trash at the curb, to the tune of roughly \$360 annually per household. Nearly 80 percent of Portsmouth residents use the transfer station, finding it more convenient, DSM found.

Curbside pickup would cost homeowners between \$190 and \$250 annually. The cost could be

absorbed by increases in the property tax rate, or user fees, including a pay-as-you-throw system.

Middletown's Town Council already has endorsed the curbside concept.

In coming to its conclusion, DSM considered whether to expand the Portsmouth transfer station or to build a new transfer station in either town.

Neither option made sense. There's no room to expand the Portsmouth transfer station - and the consultants considered Newport's transfer station, but it isn't meant for residential use. Two locations were identified as possibilities for a new collection station: the former drive-in theater in Middletown or the Navy's tank farm No. 4 in Portsmouth. There are hurdles to building at each site, Seigler said, and overcoming them would take at least three years and up to \$1.6 million.

Instead, DSM recommends that Middletown immediately look to contract curbside pickup services, and Portsmouth should consider curbside service as a long-term option to improve safety at the transfer station, handle continuing residential growth and boost recycling rates.

While Middletown would save roughly \$300,000 by moving to a curbside program, Portsmouth's costs would jump by about \$200,000, DSM's analysis found.

DSM recommends that both communities, in the long term, consider building a new transfer station for joint use.

Portsmouth Town Administrator Robert G. Driscoll said he would work with his Middletown counterpart, Gerald S. Kempen, to see how the towns could collaborate. The Portsmouth Town Council is expected to discuss the matter again as soon as next month.

Middletown, meanwhile, is waiting to see if congressional pressure might convince the Navy to issue a long-term lease to Middletown for the Burma Road property. Kempen said Middletown would hold off on issuing a request for proposals on curbside pickup services until the Navy decides.

DSM's study was coordinated by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission and paid for by a Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corp. grant.