

Officials take tour of Hermitage plant

By DAVID L. DYE Herald Staff Writer

HERMITAGE — The smell may have scrunched a few faces, but Patrick McDonnell was more than pleased as he passed pools of wastewater and containers of rotting food.

Officially called the Hermitage Food Waste to Energy Facility and Wastewater Plant, the city's facility doesn't take just wastewater — it also accepts food waste and converts it to energy. As McDonnell, secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, took it all in, plant Manager Tom Darby explained the processes and benefits of being able to recycle waste.

"This is fascinating," McDonnell said. "This place really is at a nexus of being able to solve multiple problems simultaneously."

The facility processes more than 200 tons of food waste per month, which is turned into 1.3 million cubic feet of methane gas per month. The gas is used to produce electricity, which is then sold back to the grid. Since the plant has started generating its own electricity, the plant's electric bill has been reduced from about \$25-30,000 a month to about \$5,000, Darby said.

"When McDonnell first called and said he wanted to see our facility, it was definitely a gut check moment," Darby said. "But from the moment we shook his hand, he was a very friendly guy and he was really interested in learning about our operation here."

The tour Wednesday included McDonnell, representatives from the DEP's Northwest Regional Office, and a representative from state Sen. Michele Brooks' office to see the plant's operations. Local representatives were present as well, including the Hermitage Municipal Authority and Hermitage commissioners.

Once a month, McDonnell said he takes three days and visits plants throughout the state. Though it was his second time in northwest Pennsylvania, McDonnell said the facility in Hermitage was the first one that converted food waste to energy, and he is interested in seeing more facilities in Pennsylvania adopt the process as well.

“I definitely want to learn more about what it took for them to do what they’re doing here,” McDonnell said.

Darby said several businesses in the region, including Dean Dairy in Sharpsville, Joy Cone in Hermitage, Anderson Du-Bose Co. in Lordstown, Ohio, and Paragon Industries in Warrendale, provide food waste to the facility. This means the conversion isn’t just beneficial to the plant itself, but to the surrounding area as well, Hermitage City Manager Gary Hinkson said.

“It’s a win-win-win for us, because it’s good for the environment, it’s good for the city because we’re saving on landfill costs and electricity, and it’s a good economic resource for businesses in the area who can have their waste handled at a reasonable cost,” Hinkson said.

McDonnell also discussed the state’s program requiring municipalities to upgrade and extend their storm water systems. In some communities such as West Middlesex and Shenango Township, the update could cost \$18 million, though McDonnell said the state is working providing some leeway to smaller communities that are showing some progress toward updating their systems.

“There are over 950 municipalities in Pennsylvania that are municipal separate storm water systems, and the majority of those are small municipalities, so we recognize that it can be a substantial cost for them,” McDonnell said.

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