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## County Considers Solid Waste Conversion Alternatives

BY SONIA FERNANDEZ  
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Tajiguas Landfill in Gaviota has 14 more years left. Courtesy photo

In an effort to curtail the amount of trash that gets dumped at the Tajiguas Landfill, Santa Barbara County's [Public Works](#) Department is looking at ways to process the waste before it gets buried.

“Since 1990 our population has gone up 18 percent,” said Mark Schleich, Public Works’ deputy director. “But our waste generation has gone up 54 percent.”

The spike in the amount of waste in the last few years, according to Schleich, is mainly due to the general prosperity the South Coast has enjoyed. Much of it comes from construction and demolition – waste from remodels and building upgrades. It has also become easier for people to throw things away: Electronic equipment, for instance, becomes obsolete faster and is often easier to replace than to repair or upgrade.

But for all the good times, there is a growing mound of trash buried in the foothills of the Gaviota Coast, and it’s estimated that we have 14 years left before we run out of space for our waste.

“Think of a building that covers an acre of land and is 15 stories high,” said Schleich.

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“That’s the airspace we have left.”

Other counties are already feeling the squeeze: Los Angeles is currently exporting about 20 percent of its waste, and is expected to triple that rate in the next decade. The South Coast may have to decide between permitting a new landfill in the county, or exporting its trash as well.

There’s no set plan on it yet, but Schleich has been shopping around a couple of alternatives that may prolong the life of Tajiguas, maintain a clean environment, and even generate energy and revenue.

The [conversion technology](#) strategies the county is putting out aim to divert more trash before it hits the landfill. Aside from [ongoing recycling programs](#) — residential, commercial and construction and demolition — the volume of trash we generate can be further reduced by converting it to material we can use.

“We have the potential to generate energy or alternative fuels from waste,” said Schleich. “We can look at trash as a potential energy source.”

It’s something that happens at Tajiguas already. Methane gas collected from that site, about 2.5 megawatts a day — is enough to power 2,500 homes.

It’s not as efficient as it could be, but using biological and chemical means to accelerate the decomposition of matter would increase that amount, and generate compost as well, which might have a market in the county’s agricultural areas.

Other ways of converting trash is thermal and mechanical: By using heat and pressure to process the waste, even more energy can be generated, and less trash left over.

While non-thermal processes are less expensive and less complicated to get on the ground (the facilities would be located in the remaining space at Tajiguas) than thermal technologies, less waste is diverted, and less energy is generated. Thermal processes may generate more energy, and divert more waste (plastics can be converted as well), but it’s more expensive, and the permitting process is more complicated. And, said Schleich, thermal processes are analogous in the minds of many people to combustion, a method of waste diversion that releases pollutants into the air.

“Pressure and heat doesn’t ignite the trash but creates gas the way boiling water makes steam,” he said. The process would be in a controlled environment.

“We need to know what the priorities of the community are,” said Schleich, who has talked about his plan to different communities, chambers of commerce, local government agencies, environmental groups — anyone, he said, with an interest in trash. His own department’s goals are to come up with a method that would reduce

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environmental impacts and be cost-effective.

“The way we need to look at this is to ask ourselves, ‘For a marginal cost, are we improving the way we manage our trash?’”

It’s still early in the game, said Schleich. County public works intends to complete its list of goals and criteria by the January of next year, followed with a feasibility study and then a decision by summer whether to move forward.

Whatever the community chooses, we need to look at our solid waste management practices in the long term, he said. “This would be a major change in the way we’ve managed our waste historically.”