

A bunch of garbage? How Sedgwick County's trash came to be exported and its innovator ignored

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The EPA estimates that the average American throws away 4.6 pounds of trash per day, of which 57%, or 114 million tons per year, is disposed of in one of the nation's 3,500 landfills. Despite the growing presence of trash, innovative trash-handling methods have not been adopted in Sedgwick County, and landfills and transfer stations have been the consistently chosen solutions of local leaders. The transferring of waste from our community and the attention given to "feel good" but non-cost effective measures like recycling, have minimized concern over the heaping trash problem.

A local man, Bill Compton, has spent 35 of his 83 years trying to persuade local, state and national officials, as well as private industries, to adopt the technique of pyrolysis, which is based on ancient technology and works like a distiller to convert all non-metal trash into oil, carbon and gas, turning waste into profit. Compton built a prototype of his pyrolysis plant and successfully operated it for 300 hours, converting over a thousand of pounds of trash into oil, carbon and gas in his own backyard.

In the late '90s local officials expressed interest in Compton's pyrolysis proposal and innovative trash options in general, but when the County finally released their Five Year Solid Waste Plan Review in 2003, there was no mention of pyrolysis, technology, or innovations. This paper will examine why local officials over the last three decades have extensively debated the waste issue, yet maintained their temporary, non-innovative solutions like local landfills and transfer stations. Additionally, it will show to what extent alternative options, like pyrolysis, were ever considered.