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Minneapolis garbage burner passes smell test

Bill McAuliffe, Star Tribune

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Friday was a good day, in Jake Smith's view -- the ground saturated with recent rains, the air still damp, plenty of smells in the air.

"Everything smelled a little like decay," he said.

That's not exactly what some people want to hear from the guy who heads an effort to monitor smells around the Hennepin County garbage burner -- smells that are lurking just below the surface of the debate over a new baseball stadium.

But after more than a year of daily monitoring, Smith and four other trained air smellers report that it's unlikely that aromas from the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) will overpower the odor of hot dogs -- or bad pitching -- in any stadium next door.

On his 3-mile walk-and-sniff Friday past 21 specific points on a route that rippled outward from HERC toward downtown and into the Warehouse District, Smith detected a lot of distinct smells: bus exhaust, sewer gas, blossoming plants, fish from a fish wholesaler.

"Must be fresh," he noted.

But he found the scent of solid waste distinguishable at only four sites, although one was close to where home plate may someday be. HERC smells were undetectable anywhere beyond the borders of the plant, which burns 1,000 tons of waste per day.

A senior environmentalist for Hennepin County, Smith and four other county staffers began nosing around the HERC neighborhood in March 2004, noting all types of odors but alert to incinerator smells in particular.

"We're trying to be kind of proactive as to what's going on in the neighborhood, not only with the ballpark, but with the changes in the neighborhood," he said. "There's a lot of residential property going in, and commercial, and we're aware we're located close to downtown. We wanted to start doing the testing, and find ways to mitigate any odors."

Scratch and sniff

The team developed its smelling strategies in consultation with St. Croix Sensory, a Lake Elmo firm that has become recognized nationally for its work in odor measurement.

St. Croix sensory founder Chuck McGinley worked on scratch-and-sniff technology for 3M in the late 1960s and later in enforcement for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Two years ago he patented the Nasal Ranger, a "field olfactometer" that combines carbon filtering, air dilution mechanics and nose fittings. Smith said that when he's using the device along 6th Avenue N., drivers often slow down, thinking he has a radar gun even though it's stuck to his nose.

The Hennepin County incinerator smellers also are graduates of St. Croix Sensory's odor school, and have had their noses calibrated in order to level the sniffing field. Highly sensitive smellers and those with oblivious noses are disqualified.

It's all part of an effort to make the highly personal experience of smell something that's measurable and standardized, McGinley said. Sniffers work with an agreed-upon odor vocabulary, much like wine tasters. Indeed, Smith said "cleansing the palate" with a carbon filter is the first thing a smeller does before making an odor assessment.

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To untrained noses, however, HERC is a wild card. Matt Barbatsis, who runs an outdoor volleyball program a block from where the stadium could be, said unpleasant smells from the incinerator are common in summer. He questioned whether millions of paying fans paying will be as tolerant as recreational volleyball players are. But Matt Loskota, manager of a new Edina Realty office a few blocks downwind from HERC, said no one looking for property in the booming residential neighborhood has ever asked about incinerator smells.

Smith said he's heard some complaints about incinerator smells in recent years -- from employees in his own office, which is situated right next door to the burner. But Jennifer Tschida, an environmental inspector for the city of Minneapolis department of environmental management, said there have been only two complaints linked to the incinerator's address since 2000.

Smith's smell panel found that from March 2 through Nov. 30, 2004, which would bracket the entire baseball season, odors from the incinerator were undetectable beyond the incinerator property most of the time. At opposite corners of the HERC property along 7th Street N. the panel detected incinerator odors for three straight days only once at each point. At sites at least a block away, it was 14 times more likely that a neighborhood smell -- sewers, roasting coffee, vehicle exhaust, grass -- would be detected than the smell of garbage or ash. The strongest incinerator smell recorded by the panel was along the sidewalk on the plant's 6th Avenue N. side, opposite the ball park site. That was a 7 on a scale of 2 through 60, once, on Aug. 26.

Possible smells are not the first question mark to hang over HERC, which opened in 1989 as part of a development that cost \$189 million. A steam cloud over the plant and associated street icing was a problem for its first three winters. But in 1995 the plant was named Waste-to-Energy Facility of the Year by the Solid Waste Association of North America.

Smith said that the parking lot where the ball park could go, which is usually downwind from HERC, has been a popular tailgating spot on Vikings game days in recent years, and no one has complained of smells -- even though the monitoring team has picked up plenty.

He also noted that after monitors determined that the plant's truck entry doors were open so long that smells from the tipping floor were sometimes escaping, fabric doors that roll up and down quickly were installed several weeks ago.

"We're hoping we'll get even fewer hits," he said, referring to detectable incinerator smells.

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Jake Smith, senior environmentalist in the Solid Waste Division of Hennepin County Department of Environmental Services, uses a Nasal Ranger field olfactometer to determine the strength of garbage odors at and near Hennepin County's downtown Minneapolis incinerator.

Joey Mcleister
Star Tribune
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