SACRAMENTO COUNCIL ZAPS TRASH-TO-ENERGY PLAN

Ryan Lillis for the *Sacramento Bee*

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The city of Sacramento is zapping a proposal to vaporize its trash into energy.

The City Council voted Thursday night to direct city staff to stop working with the company that had proposed a waste-to-energy plant in the city, citing concerns about the project's financial viability and technology.

The plant would have used a technology known as plasma arc gasification, which melts garbage and produces a synthetic fuel.

The proposal had led Jim Rinehart, the city's economic development director, to say the city was "on the side of the angels."

The council, however, was not convinced and voted 8-0 to order staff to take another route.

Mayor Kevin Johnson was absent from the council workshop because he had agreed months ago to emcee a charity event, said his chief of staff, Kunal Merchant.

City staff will step back, consult with outside experts and return to the council in several months when they may seek permission to send out requests for proposals on a waste-to-energy project.

That will not happen for at least six months as the council concentrates on balancing a 2009-10 budget expected to fall more than $45 million short.

"We need to back up and have a much more thorough vetting," said Assistant City Manager Marty Hanneman.

"We may end up at the same spot, but the council did not feel comfortable that what we did was thorough enough."

Sacramento-based U.S. Science & Technology's waste-to-energy plan was met with skepticism by some on the council, which delayed voting on the project several times.

Thursday, the council was convinced it was time to move on.

"(U.S. Science & Technology) made lots of claims that if true would certainly make it a very promising technology, which is why the city staff was interested," said Councilman Steve Cohn.

"But it's premature to enter into a lengthy contract with one entity instead of going further."

Cohn said the council's action Thursday was "long overdue."

William Ludwig, chief executive officer for U.S. Science & Technology, did not return a phone call seeking comment.

In November, the council questioned the independence of experts who had testified on the plant's viability.

The criticism came after a report in The Bee showed that U.S. Science & Technology had handpicked and paid for two people to come to Sacramento and speak before the council.

A Bee investigation also found that similar projects in other cities were floundering and that Sacramento officials did not delve deeply into the professional backgrounds of the people behind the Sacramento proposal.

Councilwoman Lauren Hammond, an early champion of the project, said the council was convinced "our independent experts weren't so expert" and that it became unclear whether the technology qualified as "clean energy."

"I wish staff had realized earlier that we needed an expert to help," she said.

City officials said they were still interested in finding ways to turn garbage into energy.

"We tried our best and I think it was done with good intentions," Hanneman said. "We're trying to make Sacramento the sustainable city we all want it to be."

Hanneman said the city was reimbursed for travel costs when officials traveled to Asia last year to tour other waste-to-energy plants.