

NINA MOINI: A 12-day hunger strike over a trash incinerator in downtown Minneapolis is over, but a campaign to close the facility continues. Activists have pushed for years to close the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center, or HERC. They say the facility next to Target Field is endangering the health of residents in the area, including a predominantly Black neighborhood on the city's north side. In 2023, the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution to shut down the HERC between 2028 and 2040. Environmental and labor groups are pushing the commissioners to commit to a deadline.

Sahan Journal reporter Andrew Hazzard has been covering HERC for years and joins me now to tell us more about it. Thanks for joining the program again, Andrew.

ANDREW Great to be with you, Nina.

HAZZARD:

NINA MOINI: Would you start by sharing what you know about the environmental and the health impacts of the incinerator, and why some people want to see it close?

ANDREW Sure. So the HERC is a large garbage incinerator. It burns trash continuously throughout the day, and that produces a number of emissions. And those emissions have impacts on human health. Breathing in particulate matter, breathing in nitrogen oxide pollution is bad for people. It can contribute to respiratory illnesses. It can contribute to other long-term health effects-- COPD, cancer, asthma, that sort of thing.

HAZZARD:

So it does, of course, have an acute impact on people who live near it. It's a major source of pollution. It's much like living near any large production factory or something like that. If it's burning things, if it's combusting, that is releasing particles into the air that people inevitably breathe in, and it does have an impact on human health.

NINA MOINI: It sounds like there have been efforts to close the HERC for a long time. But these three activists with the Zero Burn Coalition began this hunger strike on April 10. It ended on Tuesday. What was their goal by taking this extra step?

ANDREW I think that, in so many ways, these campaigns to close HERC that have ebbed and flowed over the last few decades have only been able to reach a certain point of success. And in 2023, as you mentioned at the top here, the County Board passed this resolution saying, hey, we agree this facility is bad for human health, the environment. We agree it impacts the people that live nearby. We want to close it sometime between 2028 and 2040.

HAZZARD:

Now, that's a big window, right? And since then, there have been some waste ordinance changes at the County, things like that, but there has not been a firm commitment to when this is going to happen. And these people, people who are organizing against this, this Zero Burn Coalition are very frustrated because they are not seeing the sense of urgency from the County, and they want to see them commit to a date.

Obviously, they want the date to be at the front end of that range, in the 2028 area, but they really want to commit to a date because they believe a commitment to a date will provide the spark needed to motivate the County to advance its goals, to increase recycling, to increase composting, to decrease the amount of waste going into the system. And they felt that these conversations that they've been having with the County Board have become incredibly circular and, for them, frustrating.

And so they said, this is a way for us to peacefully escalate this issue, to try and raise awareness about the issue, and to try and put pressure on these County commissioners to, in their eyes, finish, in a way, the job they started by creating this broad timeline for closure. They want a real date that people can look forward to and base their planning on.

NINA MOINI: So what have County commissioners told you or said, maybe, publicly about why there's that range of 12 years and why they have not set an official or an exact date to close the facility?

ANDREW HAZZARD: County commissioners are very hesitant to set a final date for a number of reasons. I think the primary reason for them is they feel ill-prepared to do this, and they feel like if they set a date and it's too early, then they are concerned that they will be sending more waste to landfills, which, of course, they would be sending more waste to landfills. Right now, that burns about 45% of all the trash that is generated in Hennepin County. The rest goes to landfills in the metro area, not in Hennepin County.

And they are concerned that this would contribute to more landfilling. And they are concerned that, basically, there is not a set plan in place for where trash that currently is processed at the HERC would go. I think what the Zero Burn Coalition would say is that you need a deadline to have the motivation to advance these goals, and you need a deadline to spark a real drive to decrease the amount of trash that we're generating here.

NINA MOINI: So the County is saying they want to try to first reduce waste. Where do they stand on those reduction goals?

ANDREW HAZZARD: No one's really doing well on waste-reduction goals. The state has a law that says that the seven-county metro region, including Hennepin County, of course, should be diverting 75% of their waste to either recycling or composting by 2030. Right now, Hennepin County is at about a 50% diversion rate. So that means 50% of what we throw out every day is either being recycled or composted, instead of sending to a landfill or an incinerator.

So no one's really making-- right now, it does not look like anyone is going to be accomplishing that 2030 goal. The County has an additional goal of what they call zero waste, which is really a 90% diversion rate, saying, we're going to recycle or compost 90% of what we throw out. That goal seems so far away right now because recycling rates, in reality, have stagnated for many years, not just in Minnesota, but across the country.

NINA MOINI: Hmm. That's so interesting. Well, thank you for sharing those facts. I wonder if the hunger strike had much of an impact. Have you been able to gauge how much of an impact this had?

ANDREW HAZZARD: I think it's really hard to quantify the impact exactly. I think what it has done is raised a sense of awareness about this. For so many of us, when we bring the trash to the curb or to the dumpster in our building or what have you, that's it, right? You took out the trash. That's what happened, and it's gone from you. It's away from you. It's out of sight. It's out of mind.

And I think they really wanted people to think about where your trash goes. If you live in Minneapolis-- in particular, in many of the surrounding suburbs-- there's a really good chance that your trash is burned in downtown, close to where many people live. And they believe that this is morally wrong and that that's not how it should be handled. And so they were doing all sorts of events to raise awareness.

They were holding events in different parts of the county over these 12 days. They were speaking at churches. They were speaking at libraries. They picketed at a Twins game. I think a lot of people do not realize, when they're at Target Field, that you are sitting right next to a trash burner, but you are. And so I think, really, they really wanted people to be more aware of their trash and where it goes and why, in their eyes, this is a poor way of dealing with it.

NINA MOINI: I wonder if there are any other entities or levels of government or legal actions that could be taken here, or what would the next steps be for these protesters or these hunger strikers?

ANDREW HAZZARD: Yeah, and so this is something that is really key to this protest, is the idea that Hennepin County owns this facility. It's called the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center. Hennepin County absolutely has the power to take a vote and close it. And I think that's the main point for these people who are against this facility, is that, hey, we know this is a major source of pollution. It is controlled by a publicly elected board. That board should be able to quite easily close this facility.

Over the years, there's been a lot of pressure put on Hennepin County from legislators at the state level who are representing parts of Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs to clean up the HERC or, in their eyes, move on from the HERC. The HERC used to qualify for renewable energy credits through the state. A state law in 2023 means they no longer receive renewable energy credits, because burning trash to create energy is not exactly renewable. There's nothing really renewable about burning trash.

There has been pressure put on the County by the state legislature through bonding bills over the years, saying, hey, you want this \$25 million that we set aside for you? You have to come up with a plan to close the HERC. And that's actually what generated the 2023 ordinance that passed. The City of Minneapolis has passed an ordinance saying they support the closure of the HERC by 2028 and that they are willing to work with the County on those goals.

So, many people in the county say, well, the City hasn't done enough to plan for where their waste would go if the HERC went away. But the City, I think, has made a good-faith effort to show that they would commit to finding different solutions for their trash, finding different contracts with waste haulers and landfills, if that were to come up. So there's been, over the years, a great deal of pressure put on the County through other elected officials in the area.

NINA MOINI: All right, Andrew. We know you're going to continue to follow this for all of us. Really appreciate your reporting. Thank you.

ANDREW HAZZARD: Thank you very much.

NINA MOINI: Andrew Hazzard is a reporter for *Sahan Journal* who focuses on climate change and environmental issues.