

History of Ramsey and Washington Counties' Joint Work on Solid Waste Management

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Ramsey and Washington Counties have a 50-year history of successful partnerships on solid waste management. Joint solid waste governance by the two Counties dates to the 1970s, when the Counties jointly owned and operated the first Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) permitted sanitary landfill in Minnesota, called the Lake Jane landfill. Following the discovery of groundwater contamination at SW-1 and prompted by state legislation, the Counties engaged in joint work to examine and implement landfill alternatives.

Since the early 1980s, there have been a series of joint powers agreements (JPAs) and amendments related to solid waste management. There has been increasing responsibility delegated by the Counties to the joint powers board (JPB) and, more recently, increased independence. Note that, over the years, form has followed function, and JPAs have been modified to reflect the changes to and increases in collaborative work.

In summary, over the past 50 years, the two Counties have continually worked together on solid waste management issues. Through the JPAs and amendments, the Counties have implemented joint governance structures to adapt to evolving legislation, state policy expectations, public input and court decisions. The JPB has increasingly been delegated responsibilities and granted increased independence to carry out this critical joint work to benefit east metro communities, economy and the environment.

Brief History of East Metro Solid Waste Collaboration

1980s – The Ramsey/Washington Waste-to-Energy Project, a JPB, was created to explore waste-to-energy technology. After examining and deciding against the use of mass-burn technology, the Counties jointly entered into agreements with Northern States Power Company (NSP, now Xcel Energy) for a privately owned and operated refuse-derived fuel (RDF) facility. NSP built and operated the facility located in Newport. The JPB focused on oversight of the agreements with NSP, and in the late 1980s, the board hired a project manager to administer the JPB.

1990s – The JPB continued oversight of the NSP agreements. A leadership change resulted in a joint staff committee comprised of staff from each county.

Early in this decade, a United States Supreme Court decision resulted in the loss of flow control of waste to privately-owned facilities (waste designation authority). Considerable public policy work was led by the JPB to assure a flow of waste to the RDF facility, resulting in contracts with and financial incentives to waste haulers for delivery of waste.

In 1999, the JPB began work on ways to implement the following expanded policy directive from the two Counties: “Ramsey and Washington Counties will work through the Ramsey/Washington County Resource Recovery Project to [...] devote additional resources to identify and divert non-processible and other waste streams from processing that can be more appropriately reduced, recycled or composted.”

2000s – The JPB, renamed to the Ramsey/Washington Resource Recovery Project (RRP) Board, continued to address methods to assure a supply of waste to the RDF facility, using hauler contracts to

Attachment 6: History of Ramsey and Washington Counties' Joint Work on Solid Waste Management

deliver waste to the RDF facility, funded by the County Environmental Charge administered by each county.

In addition, there was increased focus on waste management higher on the state's waste hierarchy. Beginning with policy work to explore alternatives, a series of JPAs expanded joint work into non-resource recovery fields including food waste/organics recovery and recycling, grants to businesses, and work with schools.

Later in the decade, the RDF facility was sold to a private equity firm's subsidiary, RRT, with the JPB leading the Counties' work on the ownership change.

2010s – The waste processing agreement with RRT provided an option for the Counties to purchase the facility. The private equity firm owning the facility decided to sell or close the facility, prompting considerable policy discussion by the two Counties and RRP Board. Ultimately, the decision was made to purchase the facility in 2015. That resulted in a new JPA, which created the currently-named Ramsey/Washington Recycling & Energy (R&E) Board.

In purchasing the RDF facility in Newport, renamed the Recycling & Energy Center (R&E Center), the Counties could implement waste designation to assure the flow of waste to a public facility. The [Ramsey and Washington Counties Joint Designation Plan](#) was approved by both county boards in August 2016, defining the system and its benefits including material recovery (e.g., metals), energy recovery, landfill abatement and other environmental benefits. Waste designation ordinances were adopted by and are implemented by each of the Counties, which were complemented by R&E's waste delivery agreements with haulers. The agreements grant haulers benefits such as waste delivery at transfer stations. From this arrangement, R&E and haulers hold voluntary business relationships, and county ordinances provide a regulatory "backstop" that incentivizes contracting and contract compliance with R&E.

The JPA creating R&E also included expanded joint activities. In 2018, county solid waste management plans were revised. County boards directed revisions to closely align the Counties' approaches to solid waste management. The resulting plans, containing 25 aligned strategies, increased the expectations for R&E to coordinate joint waste prevention and diversion work.

2020s – In 2020, the R&E Board approved a plan to increase material recovery of organics and recyclables through a series of facility enhancements. Through several funding mechanisms, including \$7 million in Minnesota state bonding funds awarded through the MPCA Capital Assistance Program, the R&E Center installed major improvements to increase the Counties' recycling rates. The recyclables recovery system (C-line) and food scraps bag recovery building were completed in 2023.

The two Counties' 2024 solid waste management plan revisions increased the alignment of strategies and sub-strategies by 10 times over the previous plans. This change, as well as a desire by the Counties to be less involved in R&E finances, resulted in a series of amendments to the JPA that created more financial independence and responsibility for R&E. Also included was a change in the governance structure of the JPA, and the establishment of an executive director position in lieu of a joint staff team.

The 2024 solid waste management plans also include an aligned policy stating, "The R&E Board will continue to evaluate and implement appropriate changes to its governance structure and size to ensure effectiveness." In September 2025, the R&E Board adopted a strategic plan with Strategic Goal 4a to explore and pursue "strengthened governance that maximizes nimbleness."