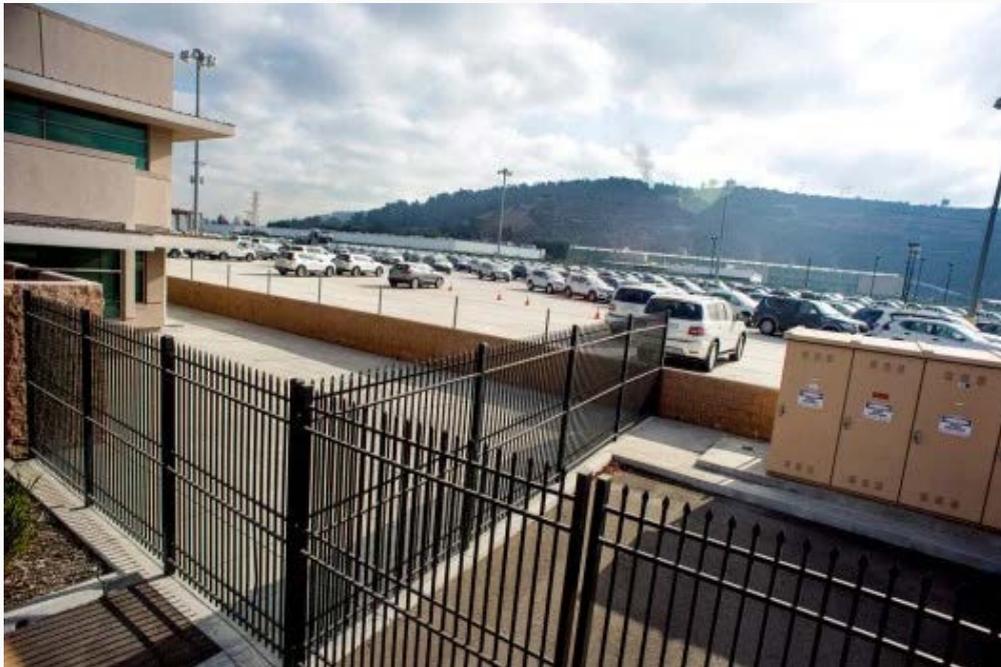


LOCAL NEWS

After spending nearly a half-billion dollars, the LA County 'trash train' will not leave the station for another 10 years, if ever



The long awaited plan to take garbage and on rail cars to transport to the desert landfill of Mesquite, 220 miles east has been put on hold for 10 years or more. The rail yard in City of Industry built for the project is empty, now used for car dealership storage Dec. 20, 2017. (Photo by Leo Jarzomb, SGV Tribune/ SCNG)

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0 COMMENTS

They call it the trash train, billed as the answer to a waste disposal crisis looming in the late 1980s and '90s that, if left unaddressed, would leave tons of garbage rotting on Los Angeles County streets.

WASTE-BY-RAIL PLAN

Since 1987, the sanitation districts of Los Angeles County have spent \$440 million buying and establishing a remote landfill in the desert known as the Mesquite Regional Landfill.



PAUL PENZELLA — SCNG

But the crisis never materialized: Literally and metaphorically, no train has ever left the station. A reduction in municipal waste tonnage from [increased recycling](#), combined with a plethora of nearby landfills with decades of remaining space, have made an empty remote landfill at the end of the line unnecessary, placing the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County's expensive trash train project on hold indefinitely.

Also known as waste-by-rail, the trash train will not leave the San Gabriel Valley for the desert — or anywhere else for that matter — until at least 2027, and maybe even later, said Chuck Boehmke, head of the districts' solid waste management department, during a recent interview from the Districts' North Whittier headquarters.

The Districts recently extended its [lease with the Orange County Waste & Recycling Department](#), which will receive Los Angeles County's trash at two of its landfills until 2025. It would take another two years to ramp up the train, Boehmke said, adding that extending the OC lease is possible.

\$440 million spent on project

Since 1987, the Districts' have spent \$440 million buying and establishing a remote landfill in the desert, the Mesquite Regional Landfill — 113 miles east of San Diego and 220 miles south of City of Industry in Imperial County — and acquiring land for new material recovery facilities, one at Puente Hills and the other in Downey. The agency also built a rail yard at Mesquite that can offload rail cars onto giant dump trucks that would deposit loads of trash into the mega landfill.

A second rail facility, finished in 2016, was built in the City of Industry, and the two rail yards bookend 220 miles of tracks stretching from Industry to Mesquite.

The remote landfill, established in 2012, has never received an ounce of trash in five years. The two rail yards have never been used. Annual maintenance costs of about \$600,000 for both ends of the waste-by-rail project — not included in the capital costs — are adding up quickly. The Districts are desperately trying to find alternative uses for the facilities.

The Sanitation Districts hired a brokerage firm to attract tenants to offset the standing costs of the mothballed project, Boehmke said.

On Jan. 10, the Districts' board of directors will most likely approve a plan to rent out the Mesquite rail yard to an agricultural entity to haul as many as 230,000 tons of hay per year from nearby farms to the rail yard, where a 24-hour operation will load the hay onto rail container cars for the 220-mile ride to the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles for shipment overseas, according to a report obtained by this newspaper through a public records request. In a second phase, the tonnage of hay would double.

The change in the permit was approved Dec. 12 by the Imperial County Board of Supervisors.

Boehme said a tenant, most likely a third party working with Imperial County farmers, has already signed on. He would not say how much the district will receive. That lease agreement also comes to a vote Jan. 10, he said and has not been made available to the public.

“We can lease the rail yards out to companies that want to use them to ship commodities” (other than trash), he explained. “Our hope is to get sufficient revenue to maintain our facilities.”

Meanwhile, the rail facility in Industry, located on 17 acres at 2500 Pellissier Place, has been sitting vacant for nearly two years. To offset its \$100,000 in yearly maintenance costs, the Districts are renting the parking lots to an automobile distributor. Last week, the lots were filled with hundreds of brand new Nissan cars, their wheels still wrapped in cardboard. Car carriers truck the automobiles for distribution to dealerships daily, he said.

“It is a car transportation company that works with car dealerships and moves the new cars that are only stored there for short periods of time,” he said.

What killed the trash train?

In a nutshell, economics.

On Oct. 31, 2013, the Districts [closed the Puente Hills Landfill](#) next to Hacienda Heights. The tall mountain of trash towering above the 60 Freeway was once the largest landfill in the nation, at one time was receiving 13,000 tons of trash per day or about 4 million tons a year — more than 40 percent of all the trash picked up and disposed in the county.



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The Great Recession, roughly from late 2007 to 2010, cut down on construction waste and total trash. Puente Hills lost one third of its tonnage. At the same time, the Districts purchased the Mesquite site for \$44 million with a capacity of 660 million tons of trash, equivalent to a lifespan of 109 years.

Orange County, recovering from bankruptcy, asked other counties for their trash. A three-year deal was struck to send all the trash headed for Puente Hills, excluding recycled materials, to two of its three landfills: the Olinda Landfill in Brea and the Frank R. Bowerman Landfill in Irvine. In July 2016, the Sanitation Districts signed a nine-year deal with Orange County, which will accept about 1.1 million tons a year, or about 10 percent of the county's waste.

A recent report says those two landfills have a combined life of 44 more years, or 126 million tons of trash – more than 12 times the amount of solid waste disposed in L.A. County each year.

From 2012 to 2016, Los Angeles County has increased the amount of trash dumped in out-of-county landfills by 57 percent.

“Once the bankruptcy occurred in Orange County, they needed revenue. Importing waste was one source of revenue,” Boehmke said. L.A. County is paying OC \$27.6 million a year for the next nine years for trash disposal.

Orange County is only charging \$25.75 per ton, less than the \$38 the Sanitation Districts charged private haulers at Puente Hills. More importantly, the cost of training waste 220 miles to Mesquite is estimated at \$105 to \$125 per ton, he said, four to five times more expensive than sending it to Orange County. When disposal rates rise, that translates into higher residential and retail trash pickup bills.



Tractors are used to spread out and layer incoming trash to the desired area at the Olinda Landfill in 2015. (PHOTO: STEVEN GEORGES, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER)

“Nobody wants to face continuing to pay that much when it is not necessary,” he said.

The waste train derailed

Trash is a commodity that is bought and sold, like pork bellies.

After Orange County leaders said they wanted L.A. County’s waste, private trash hauling companies jumped into the act.

For example, Athens Services opened six landfills in San Bernardino County and started taking in waste — at cheaper rates.

“The haulers went to the city councils and said, ‘Hey, I’ll take your garbage, let’s say to El Sobrante (in Riverside County), and I’ll charge you only \$20 a ton.’” said Mike Mohajer, a retired civil engineer who worked for the Los Angeles County’s Department of Public Works Environmental Programs Division for 40 years and is a commissioner on the county Integrated Waste Management Task Force.

Claremont, Pomona were two of the first cities to hand over their waste to private trash companies, he said. One by one, other cities followed. Ironically, many of these cities are located in the San Gabriel Valley and had supported waste-by-rail since 1987. The San Gabriel Valley Association of Cities, a precursor to the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments, pushed hard for the project after it defeated a plan by the Sanitation Districts to build waste-to-energy plants that would've involved burning trash and emitting pollution into already polluted air.

"The cities that had signed on to waste-by-rail signed franchise agreements with waste haulers," Mohajer said. "They gave the control of the waste to franchise haulers. So the Sanitation Districts had no control over that.

"Personally, I feel cities sort of pulled the rug out from under the Sanitation Districts."

Ignoring the signs?

The region does have adequate disposal capacity, an assertion a California Integrated Waste Management Board report made in 2010. "(I)t is unlikely that customers will pay the higher cost of transporting waste over a 200-mile distance from Los Angeles County to the Mesquite Regional Landfill via rail or truck. Therefore although the Sanitation Districts have committed significant resources and finances to the waste-by-rail system, it does not appear the system is required until at least 2013."



Legal skirmishes shut down a long-embattled effort to place a landfill at the former Kaiser Steel mine at Eagle Mountain in California's Mojave Desert. (AP FILE PHOTO/1997)

The county and the Sanitation Districts were at a crossroads. They were working on securing Mesquite and had just gone through a failed attempt to buy another remote landfill, Eagle Mountain, which was stopped by the courts. Yet, the recession, more recycling, more privately owned landfills and a political change to take inter-county trash had ended the looming disposal crisis.

“It became apparent waste by rail would not be required. At that point we had already bought the Mesquite Regional Landfill. It didn't make sense to leave the system unfinished,” Boehmke said.

When asked if spending nearly a half-billion dollars on an elaborate waste-by-rail system with a remote, desert landfill as the resting place for the county's trash was prudent, he answered:

“It was reasonable long-term planning for the Sanitation Districts and the county to have this put in place,” he said. “I would call it an insurance policy.”



An aerial view of the Puente Hills Intermodal Rail Yard in City of Industry. The facility is vacant. (Courtesy of Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts)