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County considers ending lease of Route 13 recycling facility

By STEVE ROBB Messenger staff journalist Feb 2, 2017

A couple weeks ago, Athens-Hocking Recycling Centers Inc. was informed that the lease for its Route 13 facility near Chauncey would not be automatically renewed in 2018. Now, there's been discussion of evicting them.

The topic came up at Tuesday's meeting of the Athens County Commissioners when a visibly upset Commissioner Charlie Adkins accused the nonprofit recycling organization of violating its lease agreement for the county-owned property.

Although Adkins cited several issues, chief among them was Athens-Hocking Recycling's starting of a used cooking oil recycling operation at the Route 13 property without getting a final OK from the commissioners.

Last year, Athens-Hocking Recycling had an opportunity to acquire a cooking oil recycling business. In August, the commissioners and representatives of the nonprofit met at the Route 13 property to discuss the possibility of using one of the buildings for the grease recycling operation. Commission President Lenny Eliason said at the time that he didn't see a problem with it, as long as it was OK with Burr Oak Water District, which has a nearby wellfield. Adkins, though, said he wasn't sure he supported the idea, even if the water district did not have objections.

Subsequent to that meeting — and without informing the commissioners — a trailer containing the grease recycling equipment was moved onto the property. A propane line was hooked up to the trailer so that used cooking oil could be warmed for straining, and an electric line was hooked up so that a fan could be operated in the trailer.

On Tuesday, Adkins told Athens-Hocking Recycling Executive Director Bruce Underwood and members of the nonprofit's board that the gas and electric hookups were done in violation of code, and that running an electric house fan beside open barrels of grease is a fire hazard.

"Why it ain't caught fire yet, with all the grease that's pushing through the fan, is beyond me. And that's illegal," Adkins said. "When the fire department rolls up to that and it's on fire, and they don't know that crap's in there, and they put water on that, you're going to have a heck of a mess, or they will."

Underwood said he wasn't aware of the code violations, and he said use of the trailer — which was brought there from the prior owner of the cooking oil recycling operation — was temporary.

"The intention was that was a temporary solution — just to move it from one site to the other, inside that trailer," he said.

Adkins said there was supposed to be discussion with the commissioners before starting the grease recycling operation.

"I do agree, this wasn't done properly. We did not go through the final motions and get the agreement in place," Underwood said. "I think we jumped the gun a little bit, and I think that's what's causing some of these issues."

Adkins raised several other concerns, including what he said is a lack of maintenance of the property, litter and the long-term storage of recyclables at the facility.

"It's not a holding facility, and I think that's what it has become...," Adkins said.

Underwood said recyclable glass is moved in and out of the facility. Adkins said that may be true, but some of it has been there for more than a year.

Adkins said he will likely make a motion at next week's commissioners meeting to end Athens-Hocking Recycling's lease of the property before it is due to expire. The current expiration date is Aug. 31, 2018.

"I really believe in the recycling, that we need to do this stuff," Adkins said. "I have issues when it's done this way."

Eliason said there are now two possibilities — renegotiate a lease and continue to allow the recycling facility to be there after 2018, or terminate the current lease early.

He told the Athens-Hocking Recycling officials it was "a bad move on your part" to start the cooking oil recycling without the OK of Burr Oak Water District.

"That's a lack of faith," Eliason said. "That doesn't give me any confidence in continuing forward."

"Understood," Underwood said.

"You've got to work to figure out how ... to make us happy and work through it," Eliason said. "I'm not really a fan of terminating early. But if we've got hazardous situations, we're going to terminate it."

Eliason told the Athens-Hocking Recycling officials that the county has space needs, and is also in the process of evaluating what it wants to do with the Route 13 property, not just the recycling site but other acreage the county owns there.

"I would think that more than likely, we're not going to renew the lease...," Eliason said. "But I think in the spirit of help and support, we'd probably stay with it until the lease is up. But again, there are issues that have to be corrected, and if they're not going to be corrected, that's going to be a problem from our standpoint."

Underwood said corrective steps will be taken.

However, based on Tuesday's meeting, recycling center officials said they'll start looking at other locations for moving operations from the Route 13 facility, with some of it possibly going to the non-profit's Poston Station Road site. Allowing the current lease to run to its conclusion would allow more time to do that, they said.

As The Messenger previously reported, Burr Oak Water District has raised a number of concerns about practices at the recycling facility because of concern the wellfield could potentially become contaminated. Underwood said strides have been made toward dealing with those concerns — such as stopping the fueling of trucks at the facility, and not storing trucks there — but the nonprofit still hasn't gotten the higher liability insurance requested by the water district.

Issues raised by the water district are what prompted the commissioners to notify Athens-Hocking Recycling a couple weeks ago that the lease would not be automatically renewed.

Burr Oak General Manager Kent Nichols told the commissioners Tuesday he doesn't believe an agreement on solving all the issues can be reached with Athens-Hocking Recycling. He also said he doesn't feel officials of the nonprofit have been forthright with him.

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