

## The Fairfield Ledger

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### Medical Waste Follies: Keep Out Autoclave

Editor's note: Chris Hallinger was among the participants in a rally in Des Moines last week protesting the installation of a medical waste autoclave in Eldon. He lives in Fairfield.

By Chris Hallinger

The other day I took a trip to Des Moines, and spent the day at the state Capitol building. The reason I went was to protest the plans of a few public-spirited individuals who want to turn southeast Iowa into a toxic waste site in exchange for large amounts of money, which they would then deposit into their bank accounts.

Their idea is to build a giant medical waste processing plant right in the town of Eldon, next to houses, churches, a school, a stream, and the Gothic House. This plant would be so large that it could take medical waste from the entire U.S.A., and maybe even some foreign countries, if they felt like contributing any to the pile. Not only that, but it's not all that far from my own personal house here in Fairfield.

At first all the waste was supposed to be burned up in a state-of-the-art incinerator, which would put state-of-the-art chemicals like dioxins and furans into the air. These in turn would float over to my house, come through the window, and go straight into my lungs, which I had been planning to use for breathing purposes if that's all right with everybody.

They had to change that plan because of the moratorium against incinerators, so they came up with the autoclave idea instead. Now the waste would just be steam-cleaned, kind of like the way your suit gets cleaned at the dry cleaners. But at the end of the process, there would still be a big mountain of waste material sitting there. Even if it is clean, what in the world are they going to do with it? Make Christmas decorations out of it?

The meeting in Des Moines was not all that reassuring to me. It started out with a string of experts who all testified that medical waste was not that big a deal, and that there was nothing much to worry about. I kept wondering: If this stuff is so safe, why are people from Miami to Seattle trying to put it in trucks and ship it all the way to Eldon, Iowa? Is it because they like us? Somehow, I didn't think so.

During the lunch break, the group from the Eldon and Fairfield area gathered together to hold a press conference to present an opposition point of view. We walked across the Capitol rotunda, carrying our signs. It was supposed to be outside the building. When we opened up the door to the east entrance, sure enough there was a group of reporters and TV crews at the bottom of a long flight of steps.

"Hey!" we yelled down to them. "What are we supposed to do? We're new at this!"

"Come closer!" they yelled back. "We can't hear you if you stay way up there!"

So we walked about halfway down, and formed back into a little group. "Now what?" we yelled.

"Closer!" they yelled back.

This kept up for a while until we were finally standing right next to them. Then we had the press conference. The reporters asked questions, and held out microphones just like they do on TV. Come to think of it, it was on TV. I guess that explains it. Then the afternoon session started up. As it turns out, Iowa has problems enough just trying to deal with our own medical waste. Many local hospital incinerators will soon be obsolete because of new air quality standards, and they can't afford to build new ones. So we're probably going to have to come up with some new facilities just to handle what our state produces.

A man spoke who was from the town of Harlan. He had led a successful opposition to a facility that would have brought medical waste into their small town from hundreds of miles away. When he was done speaking, some of the congressmen gave him a hard time. I don't know why they did that. I thought they should have given him a medal.

Then the group from Eldon spoke. They really did a nice job presenting their case. Using a simple magic-marker drawing, they showed the proposed site in Eldon, and explained all the reasons why it was a completely ridiculous location. They explained that there were no environmental studies done, and that the contractors apparently have no experience in the medical waste field. And most of all, they didn't need a facility of this size in their town, or anywhere else in the state for that matter.

This whole project is so ludicrous that when the story of it is told, all people can do is sit there and shake their heads. That's what happened here. One of the congressmen said the provisions of the contract for this facility were so bizarre that he couldn't believe that the town of Eldon actually approved it. For example, there's the clause that says that the town can't pass any laws which will have any power over the medical waste plant. That one really mystified the legislators.

The meeting ended. There were some hopeful signs at the end that our state leaders understand the threat to Iowa of becoming a dumping ground for the nation, and that they are going to try to prevent that from happening. But it was hard to tell. It seems that there are still people out there who think this is a safe project, and a good way for the state to bring in some money.

The matter has not yet been decided one way or the other. At this point, I would like to urge everyone who lives in this area to stay informed, and to let your feelings be known about this issue. If you don't want medical waste to be shipped here from all over the country, I would recommend that you tell somebody about it. Let's make sure that it never happens.