

## EPA still tied to Oct. 31 deadline for WTE plant decision

Business groups express support for project, citing environmental, economic benefits

BY JOHN MARINO  
marino@caribbeanbusiness.pr

Even though the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will extend the public comment period on the proposed waste-to-energy (WTE) plant in Arecibo, the federal agency is bound to render a final decision on the project by an Oct. 31 deadline, EPA officials told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS.

Furthermore, there is no procedural mechanism in place for the agency to try to extend the deadline, which is triggered by a one-year timeframe from when the EPA told developer Energy Answers that its application for the required permit was complete.

The EPA announced last week that it would extend the project's public comment period after it was forced to abruptly end a public hearing in Arecibo when project opponents protested an EPA decision to limit the time each speaker would be allotted to ensure that all would be given a chance to speak.

"At this point we don't know yet how long the public comment period will be extended for, as we need to schedule a new hearing that will require at least 30 days' notice. We are working out details," EPA spokeswoman Mary Mears said, adding that the agency expected to announce a new date for the public hearing this week.

The EPA said it will make every effort to ensure that the new hearing provides ample opportunity for comment and encouraged people to submit comments in writing.

"No final decision will be made on the permit until public comments are reviewed and considered," officials added.

Last week's hearing at the University of Puerto Rico-Arecibo campus on the EPA's proposed draft permit for the Energy Answers project was part of a broader public comment period that was to end June 29.

EPA officials had previously committed to hearing every member of the community who wished to speak, but then proposed dividing the time granted by the university



*EPA officials preside over last week's public hearing in Arecibo before it was abruptly cancelled after waste-to-energy project opponents protested proposed time limits for speakers.*

equally between those who had asked the EPA for a turn to speak. Opponents of the project opposed the move, loudly protesting their displeasure, according to reports, until EPA officials decided to cancel the hearing.

Energy Answers officials blamed opponents for the "shameful incident" and said they tried to block residents in favor of the project from speaking.

"Democracy has rules so that everyone can express themselves," said environmental consultant Rafael Toro. "Despite the actions of this group, we will continue educating and speaking with the people of Arecibo."

### BUSINESS GROUPS BACK PROJECT

Project proponents who traveled to Arecibo to express their support included Associated General

Contractors of America-Puerto Rico Chapter President Manuel Suárez Miranda and Puerto Rico Homebuilders Association Executive Director José Alberto Feliciano.

Suárez Miranda said it has long been known that Puerto Rico's landfills are approaching capacity and are a major source of pollution, and that the WTE project would help resolve this situation while producing "green energy."

"There are 86 of these projects across the United States, with the most modern just established in Palm Beach, Fla. The Arecibo project, according to law, must have better antipollution systems than those in Florida," Suárez Miranda said. "There has never been a complaint about pollution in areas where these projects are located."

The Homebuilders Association also sees great economic

and environmental benefits to the project.

"The proposal will be highly beneficial to a municipality in serious economic difficulties and will be highly beneficial to the protection of the environment," Feliciano said.

The proposed WTE plant would have the capacity to burn more than 2,000 tons of trash daily, producing some 80 megawatts of alternative energy in the process. Energy Answers says the plant would pump \$350 million into the island economy and create 3,800 jobs during the construction phase and 150 permanent jobs.

The company said the plant could be in service in the next three years and would establish an advanced materials recovery and recycling operation.

The EPA granted a draft air permit for the facility after evaluating its potential impact on air quality by comparing it to EPA air quality standards established to protect public health. The EPA's evaluation also included assessing the impact of the facility on nearby low-income communities. Based on information available to date, the EPA has concluded that operation of the facility won't cause any health standards to be exceeded or any communities to be disproportionately and adversely affected.

To obtain the EPA permit, Energy Answers was also required to demonstrate that the pollution controls on the plant are as strict or stricter than any other plant being built in the U.S. today. The EPA has included these pollution controls, which are considered the best technology of its kind available, as requirements in the proposed permit.

The proposed permit also requires Energy Answers to test the pollution it emits to the atmosphere. Before the facility can begin full operation, it must demonstrate it meets the pollution limits the EPA is proposing to establish. The permit requires pollution levels to be measured and reported to the EPA during operation. Failure to meet any of these standards would subject the facility to EPA enforcement actions. ■

**"No final decision will be made on the permit until public comments are reviewed and considered."**

—EPA officials on the agency's decision to extend the public comment period on a proposed waste-to-energy plant in Arecibo