

Saint Anthony Park Community Council  
Environment Committee  
Meeting Minutes, May 26, 2021

Members present: Ben Bauer, Rennie Gaither, Lisa Habeck, Manu Junemann, Mohit Kumar, Michael Russelle (co-chair), Betty Wheeler

Visitors: Clara Junemann, Mike Gunderson (WestRock), Amber Moore (WestRock)

Following Michael's land acknowledgement, each person introduced themselves briefly.

**Westrock**

Mike Gunderson, General Manager of the WestRock facility, was invited to provide our committee with description of the plant and to discuss a couple of issues that have arisen. Mike is a chemical engineer with long experience in the paper manufacturing industry and moved to WestRock in 2012. He explained that paper recycling began at this location in 1908. Today, they process about 70% of all recycled fiber in Minnesota, amounting to about 1100 tons per day. They produce boxboard, used for cereal boxes, tissues, etc. and corrugated paper, used for pizza boxes, for example. This 42-acre facility employs 360 people, nearly all of whom are members of the United Steel Workers, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, or the International Union of Operating Engineers. Annual payroll and benefits amount to \$42 million.

Mike explained that there are three types of paper mills: fully integrated, chemical-intensive processing, like that at Sappi in Cloquet; virgin mills that use thermomechanical processing, like the UPM Blandin mill in Grand Rapids; and primarily water processing of recyclable fibers with little chemical use, like the WestRock facility. WestRock is regulated by EPA (air emissions, including greenhouse gases), MCPA (air and water emissions), FDA (food-grade quality of ), the Met Council (industrial discharge), Ramsey County (hazardous waste), the City of St. Paul (permit as a recycling center), and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (triple chain of custody certification). They are designated as a very small quantity generator of hazardous waste (less than 100 kg per year). He credits Amber Moore, a chemical engineer, for helping achieve this low level of generation.

Mike explained that the facility has actively sought to become more sustainable in the past decade or two. They reduced the number of products they produced, converted to natural gas from fuel oil, installed and optimized variable drive turbines to co-generate 40% of their electricity, upgraded lighting, reduced water use by treating and recycling water within the plant, optimized their HVAC systems, filter stormwater, and found new uses for short fibers that were rejected from their process lines

The committee asked how they control litter that blows off their property. Mike replied that they are taking several steps. They recently installed netting across the top of the southern part of the outside yard where paper is fed into the mill and will be installing a ¼-inch mesh netting

over the entire fence surrounding the yard. However, he admitted that when gusty winds enter the yard at certain angles, paper may still escape. Several employees cleaned up fugitive paper near the plant. At the suggestion of a neighbor, they will have a Billy Goat litter vacuum to clean up paper litter that escapes the yard.

Complaints about malodors from the plant have been posted on social media and been expressed elsewhere during the past few months. Mike said that they have analyzed the plant and think the source of these odors is one cooling tower in the SW area of the plant. It serves vacuum pumps that help dry the paper. The pumps are cooled by water, generating heated water that needs to be cooled prior to reuse. The current configuration is an open system in which hot water is sprayed into a stream of air before it drops into the open base of the tower, from which it is recirculated. Mike is quite sure this open water is the source of the odor because the system concentrates minor contaminants in the water with each pass through the tower. This fall, they will install a closed-circuit cooler to replace the old configuration. This cooler operates by evaporating fresh water, so bad odors from this source will be eliminated. The cost of this upgrade is about \$450,000.

A question was raised about whether they remove microplastics from wastewater generated in the plant. Mike explained that the mixed paper they receive contains many other materials. As described earlier, the plant processes 1100 tons of fiber per day. That requires that they remove about 100 tons of waste materials from an initial 1200 tons of used paper products. This problem has been exacerbated by the single sort recycling program used in many communities. After pulping the paper in water, they run the material through a series of screens and centrifugal cleaners until everything passes a 0.06-inch (about 1.5 mm) sieve. The resulting paperboard cannot have visible plastic contaminants. Mike recognizes the problem, since plastics are ubiquitous, but knows of no way to remove microplastics from the slurry.

Asked about what comprises their hazardous waste, Mike explained that they have a waste minimization team that focuses on both solid waste and hazardous waste. One of the largest types of hazardous waste used to be paint that was used on walkways and other surfaces in their 39 buildings. They have changed protocols to reuse paint to minimize that waste stream. Aerosol cans also used to be a major component of their hazardous waste stream but are now considered Universal Waste, so they can be collected and transported more easily to appropriate recyclers. In addition, they outsourced their laboratory analyses, which used to produce hazardous waste, and closed that portion of their business. Hazardous waste production also decreased when they closed their carton folding facility, in which the presses used large amounts of ink and produced VOCs. Asked about generation of small particulates in air, Mike thinks most come from traffic on their open lots, rather than processing.

The committee thanked Mike and Amber for their presentation. We likely will organize a community meeting in fall and Mike welcomes the opportunity to meeting with the public. He also welcomes tours of the plant, once the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission is low. In the meantime, look for the name WestRock on the pizza boxes you receive.

## **New member**

The committee voted unanimously to accept Aaron Hinz as a new member. Welcome, Aaron!

## **100 Tree Initiative**

As described before, this is a cooperative project of the Creative Enterprise Zone, Transition Town All Saint Anthony Park, and the SAPCC. Ben Shardlow is the lead; our group is led by Rennie and includes Manu and Gordon. The purpose is to prepare and plant 100 trees to increase the tree canopy in South SAP. Trees will be transplanted into gravel beds for the summer, which stimulates root proliferation. The trees will be transplanted in September to identified sites where landowners agree to water and otherwise care for the trees.

So far, one gravel bed has been prepared; two others are ready to be filled. The trees have arrived from Oregon and are being “sweated” to break the cold-induced dormancy they developed over winter. Tell Rennie or Michael if you want to volunteer.

## **Brief updates and announcements**

### **Naming the new park**

The name recommended by our Dakota advisors and their elders is *Ćekpá*, as discussed last month. Parks and Rec wants further documentation, including who among the Indigenous people recommended it and an assessment by the Director of Native American Initiatives of the Minnesota State Historical Society. We have asked for and received extra time to provide this information.

### **Webinar: Actualizing Equity and Environmental Justice**

Michael plan to attend this and provided the email to us. Preregistration is required.

### **Public art at Como and Carter**

The new sculpture of an over-sized honeybee hive will be installed in the next couple of weeks. It has portals for children and adults to look in and a bulletin board on the other side. We will need to help curate the notices to keep the bulletin board tidy. One nearby business owner does not like it, but has not participated in earlier discussions with the artist. What needs to be recognized is that public art that is supported by dedicated funds through Public Works does not need local support. However, Brad Kaspari did take the time to meet with us and listen to ideas about his plan.

### **Habitat Map software**

Betty informed us that this group ([habitatmap.org](http://habitatmap.org)) is seeking ideas of what users and potential users would like to see in future versions. We are familiar with how it helps provide visualization of air quality readings from AirBeam air quality monitors.

### **I94 and TH280 updates**

MnDOT has been working on plans for I94 for about two years and finally met with our Transportation Committee. They say they are still in the phase of thinking about broad issues,

like the number of lanes the freeway will have. More detail can be found in that committee's minutes. TH280 has not been considered by them, except insofar as the interchange with I94 is concerned. The committee tried to make it clear that MnDOT needs to consider impacts further than the half mile of either side of I94 because of truck traffic and vehicle speeds on frontage roads, and that TH280 should be part of their scope since it delivers and receives so much traffic from I94.

Minutes from the April meeting were approved with two abstentions (Ben and Lisa), who had not attended.

We will try to meet outside and in person at our next meeting unless members object or the weather is inclement. Plan to bring your masks anyway in case visitors require protection.