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Houghton Recycling and Transfer Station

A history of understandings between the City of Kirkland and King County Solid Waste Division

Introduction

This document was co-written by King County's Solid Waste Division and the City of Kirkland to address questions about the history of the Houghton Transfer Station and conversations about its closure and replacement.

The Houghton Transfer Station is operated and maintained by King County's Solid Waste Division (SWD). The station provides garbage disposal and basic recycling services to residents and business in the growing northeast King County service area. It is located in the South Rose Hill/Bridle Trails neighborhood of Kirkland, bordered by the closed Houghton Landfill on the north side, Bridle Trails State Park on the south, and private homes on the east and west.

The adjacent closed Houghton Landfill accepted refuse starting in the early 1950s. The Houghton Transfer Station was opened in 1967, shortly after closure of the landfill. Since then, the populations of Kirkland and other communities in the service area have grown dramatically, increasing demand for recycling and garbage services. Houghton is one of King County's busiest transfer stations, but it offers limited recycling services and lacks the capacity to provide more recycling services to meet the needs of the growing population in the northeast service area.

SWD conducted an evaluation of King County's transfer stations for the [2006 Solid Waste Transfer and Waste Management Plan](#). The evaluation indicated that the Houghton station failed to meet service-level criteria due to its lack of capacity to provide expanded services.

Upgrades to the station were completed in 2010 in accordance with a 2005 Memorandum of Understanding between King County and the City of Kirkland (detailed below). However, the transfer station still lacks the features of a modern facility--including comprehensive recycling services, waste compactors, and a larger, enclosed building to control noise and odor and provide more efficient operation.

King County's [2019 Solid Waste Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan \(Comp Plan\)](#) recommended constructing a new, modern recycling and transfer facility in northeast King County. The current site of the Houghton Transfer Station is being considered as a possible location for this new facility, along with the [Houghton Park and Ride](#) in Kirkland and the Winsome Trading and Northwest Utilities properties in Woodinville.

History of Plans and Agreements Related to the Houghton Transfer Station

At various times throughout the history of the Houghton station, there has been the desire among some Kirkland residents, the City of Kirkland, and King County to close the station and relocate the facility in a location away from homes. Conversely, other residents, community members, and officials have

regarded the current location of the transfer station as an asset to the City, offering residents and businesses relatively lower solid waste rates, convenience, and recycling opportunities.

In [King County's first community survey](#) on the project from November 2020, 68 percent of respondents said that having a transfer station nearby was either "very important" (30%) or "important" (38%). Forty percent of respondents said they visit the current Houghton facility at least a few times a year.

There have been many conversations in past years with transfer station neighbors and solid waste customers about the modernization of King County's transfer facilities, including the need to build a new transfer station to expand services for growing northeast county communities.

Several plans and agreements have documented recommendations related to the Houghton Transfer Station and its capacity to meet the needs of the northeast service area. Past documentation consistently noted the need to close and replace the existing facility, which some may have understood to mean that the County intended definitively to both close the existing station and locate the new Northeast Recycling and Transfer Station elsewhere in Kirkland or in another city in the [northeast service area](#). However, closing the existing facility does not preclude the County from siting and constructing a new, modern station at the same location. As noted above, it is one of three sites under consideration.

King County has the final decision-making authority to select the location for a transfer station in accordance with state law ([RCW 36.70A.200](#)), which states, "No local comprehensive plan or development regulation may preclude the siting of essential public facilities." Commitments or recommendations made in solid waste planning documents regarding closure/replacement of the Houghton station are not legally binding.

However, a site will be selected through a comprehensive process involving public input from the communities in the service area and the two potential host cities.

Formally Adopted Documents

Although historical correspondence exists documenting contemporary perspectives on the transfer station and landfill site dating back more than forty years, the three documents listed below were adopted by King County and the City of Kirkland. Ultimately, the Solid Waste Division is guided by the 2019 [Comp Plan](#), approved by the King County Council and 24 of King County's 37 partnering cities.

2005 Memorandum of Understanding

In 2005, King County and the City of Kirkland, with the assistance of stakeholders on the Houghton Transfer Station Task Force, negotiated and agreed on a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (Memorandum) to address some operational, environmental, and quality of life issues at the station. Although the Memorandum is not legally binding, King County agreed to and has since [completed](#) several mitigation projects and adopted new operational practices to reduce the station's impacts on neighbors. To improve safety and address neighbor concerns SWD prohibited leaving trailers full of waste on site over night; raised and strengthened the transfer station roof; installed a sound barrier; added a pedestrian pathway; covered lights, and reconfigured the trailer parking area.

The Memorandum includes King County’s commitment to “expand, relocate, or replace any combination thereof, transfer stations when safety, efficiency, capacity, or customer services needs cannot be met by existing transfer facilities.” The existing Houghton Transfer and Recycling Station no longer meets the needs of the service area, and thus the County will replace it with a modern station.

2006 Transfer and Waste Export Plan

Issued the year following the Memorandum, King County’s [2006 Transfer and Waste Export Plan](#) made recommendations for current King County transfer stations, including Houghton. The plan recommended closing the existing Houghton Transfer and Recycling Station and building a replacement at a new, as yet undetermined, location.

2019 Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan

The King County Council, Washington State Department of Ecology, and a majority of the cities with which King County partners adopted the [Comp Plan](#) to ensure continuous regional transfer and disposal services through 2040. The Comp Plan lays out objectives and plans for waste reduction, recycling, and garbage disposal for the next 19 years, and guides the work of the Solid Waste Division to support an equitable, sustainable waste disposal system for the County and participating cities.

Siting a New Transfer Station in Compliance with the Comp Plan

To meet the needs of the rapidly-growing northeast service area, the Comp Plan recommended that King County continue to modernize its transfer system and identified the Houghton Transfer Station as needing to be replaced. Action 1-t in the Comp Plan calls for the existing facility to be closed when the new recycling and transfer station begins operating.

Each of King County’s new recycling and transfer stations has been constructed on the same site as the station it replaced. These include the Shoreline Recycling and Transfer Station (2009), Bow Lake (2013,) and Factoria (2019). New stations were built on the same sites as the old stations partly in response to the challenges of finding suitable and affordable sites in highly-developed urban areas. The new South County Recycling and Transfer Station has been sited on a parcel next to the existing Algona Transfer Station and will begin operating in 2024.

Siting a replacement transfer station is based on both technical requirements for operations and site constraints such as site size and shape, as well as addressing the needs and concerns of the service area communities. The siting process-- from development of site selection criteria to final selection of a site-- involves many steps, and public involvement plays an important role in each.

The six major steps in the [siting process](#) are as follows:

- 1) Pass/fail criteria, also called exclusionary criteria, were developed for the project based on the County’s mission, vision, and values. Pass/fail criteria establish minimum standards that a site must meet to qualify for consideration.

- 2) A desktop review considering site characteristics such as shape, cost, and environmental constraints was conducted with the goal of identifying 15 to 20 sites for further screening.
- 3) These sites were scored, with input from consultants, SWD staff, and representatives of the four potential host cities (Kirkland, Redmond, Sammamish, and Woodinville). Four sites emerged from this process, located in Kirkland, Redmond, and Woodinville.
- 4) The four sites were further evaluated to determine which should be included in environmental review under the [State Environmental Policy Act \(SEPA\)](#) and development of an [Environmental Impact Statement](#) (EIS). This evaluation included input from community members through a public survey; the Siting Advisory Group; consultants; SWD staff; representatives of the potential host cities, and the Department of Local Services.
- 5) The result of this evaluation was the identification of three sites that will advance to environmental review under SEPA and the development of an EIS. The environmental review process will start with "scoping" in summer 2021, when the public will be invited to comment on the proposed siting alternatives, impacts, and potential mitigation measures to study in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). King County will then prepare a Draft EIS due out for public review and comment in early 2022. For more information on the environmental review process, please visit the Washington Department of Ecology.
- 6) The final step in siting will be the selection and acquisition of the site by King County.

More detailed information can be found on the [project website](#).

Conclusion

Over the years, many conversations have occurred and many planning efforts have been undertaken pertaining to closure and replacement of the Houghton Transfer Station.

The City of Kirkland has been a host to the Houghton Transfer Station for nearly 60 years, and while King County strives to be a good neighbor, there have been times when operations have fallen short of community expectations. Although the County has made progress in mitigating impacts as outlined in the 2005 Memorandum, some of the issues with the station are exacerbated by its age, size, and limitations.

The 2019 Comp Plan, which paved the way to site the Northeast Recycling and Transfer Station, was adopted by a majority of King County cities after a robust public engagement process that included opportunities for comment during an environmental review under SEPA. After considering the input from prospective host cities and community members, King County is ultimately responsible for locating essential public facilities such as the future transfer station in areas where they can serve local and regional needs.

Wherever it is located, the new facility will be designed to minimize impacts to nearby communities. New, modern transfer stations offer improved recycling services, significantly reduced noise and odor impacts, and other community benefits such as improved sidewalks, safety features, public art, parks, and more. Compaction of refuse at the station will also reduce truck traffic by as much as one third.



Throughout the design process, SWD will consult regularly with the neighboring community of the selected site to ensure that design and operation of the new facility address community concerns, reflects community desires, and benefits those who live, work, and play nearby.