

# GUEST ESSAY: Hughes Energy project would not benefit region or environment

By Tracy Frisch and Barbara Joudry

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In his guest essay, Hughes Energy CEO Dane McSpedon makes assertions that contradict our findings and defy common sense (Feb. 26, “An immediate solution to problem of landfills and methane creation”).

The op-ed says that Hughes Energy plans on investing \$1 billion in New York, but the numbers don’t add up. McSpedon told *The Post-Star* in January that Hughes Energy needs a \$90 million loan to build its garbage processing plant in Fort Edward. The company is also looking for big government grants.

Hughes Energy would have us believe that pressure-cooking 465 tons of garbage a day is a safe, clean, odor-free, and rational way to deal with municipal solid waste — the stuff we put in a garbage bag. This garbage would be steamed under high pressure in a huge, industrial autoclave (60 feet long, 10 feet high) at the former dewatering plant site in Fort Edward on the Champlain Canal. Does cooking trash using fossil fuel (propane or natural gas) sound like a sustainable, “green” business?

This technology was first tried for processing garbage more than 20 years ago. Yet no facility using this process has been able to operate for more than a few years.

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Autoclaves are indeed in wide use for manufacturing, and sterilization of medical equipment and supplies. But mixtures of diverse materials are not easy to cook or manage: think dirty diapers, dog poop, rotten food, broken stuff, discarded containers, mercury from fluorescent light bulbs and thermometers, household hazardous waste (pesticides and solvents), and consumer products containing PFAS “forever chemicals.”

One stated purpose for this giant autoclave would be extracting “fiber” (from food waste and cardboard) from the wet, pressure-cooked garbage, to sell to paper mills. There’s no evidence that paper mills would have a use for such low-quality fiber. And wouldn’t this fiber, likely bathed in a toxic broth of carcinogens and other chemicals, be a liability?

A solid waste regulator who oversaw a Limerick, Ireland garbage autoclave built by a Hughes Energy precursor expressed surprise that anyone could consider autoclaves for garbage processing today! In her experience, this technology was a failure, and the fiber end-product grew mold.

In Anaheim, California, a World Waste Technologies Inc. garbage autoclave facility, similar to the one Hughes proposed, operated for less than five years before shutting down. In a 2005 Securities and Exchange Commission filing, World Waste listed its inability to get commitments from paper companies to purchase its “fiber” as a major challenge.

Companies make groundless promises about jobs to gain support: Remember the Hudson Falls trash incinerator and its inflated job projections. In November, McSpedon stated that the Hughes Energy facility would be automated, but his op-ed claimed the facility would have 50 employees in Fort Edward.

Hughes Energy touts autoclaving as the answer to methane released from landfills. Research suggests otherwise — autoclaving appears to facilitate the production of methane. See “Autoclave Pretreatment Key to Unlocking Methane, Finds New Research,” published July 13, 2015, in *Waterworld*, the trade magazine for wastewater treatment plant operators.

There are better ways: First, recycling paper and cardboard keeps them out of landfills. There is currently very high demand for clean, used corrugated cardboard, which commands a high price from paper mills.

Second, food waste can and should be composted, using a proven method that yields a soil amendment good for lawns, gardens and farms. The NYS Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law went into effect in January 2022, and more effective organics recycling is happening. A supposedly green solution that mixes all kinds of garbage and cooks it in a giant autoclave powered by gas is not the solution. When pressed on his misuse of the word “composting,” McSpedon stated, “Obviously and technically you’re absolutely correct. We’re not composting.”

Now we hear from *The Post-Star* op-ed that Hughes Energy has changed its plan. Rather than processing mixed garbage, the company wants to autoclave organic

materials. But a large, source-separated supply of organics, such as food waste, cardboard and paper, does not exist. The highest use for these materials will be to make compost, not a low-quality wood pulp substitute.

Taxes are another issue. A business that fails won't be paying taxes. And wouldn't Hughes seek a PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) exempting it from sales tax on building materials and greatly reducing its property taxes?

Hughes Energy holds the exclusive North American license for the Wilson System, developed by engineer Tom Wilson in the UK in 1998. Since then, this autoclave system has been deployed five times in the UK and Ireland, according to Hughes Energy. Yet the company refuses to share any details about them. (We only found evidence of the failed Limerick test plant and a small trial project in York, England.) Brendan Hughes, who founded Hughes Energy, has been trying to sell this technology in the U.S. since 2011, when he was an investor with Re3 USA Ltd.

Hughes, Wilson and their associates have been involved with 11 limited liability corporations in the UK or Ireland. All but three of them have declared bankruptcy or been dissolved, and none of those remaining companies are profitable, according to the UK's corporations database.

Hughes Energy tries to scare us about landfill closures and rising fees for garbage, implying that we are at risk of having no place to send our trash. But with the Wheelabrator Hudson Falls incinerator and the Greenridge landfill in Northumberland, we have more disposal capacity than we need in the tri-county area.

On the contrary, Hughes Energy would have to import garbage to meet its needs. It would take about 40 packed garbage trucks daily to feed the proposed facility in Fort Edward.

Hughes never mentions that most garbage going through the Hughes Energy autoclave system would still need to go to a landfill or incinerator, excluding whatever "fiber" and recyclables could be salvaged.

When a group of concerned citizens met with McSpedon on Nov. 11th (transcript and recording at <http://www.cleanairactionnetwork.org>), he agreed to answer follow-up questions but has not answered.

If we thought Hughes Energy was a profitable and sound and green business, we could support it. But it is not.

Is Hughes Energy presenting the area with an amazing deal? Or is the company spinning a tale about a failed technology? Hughes Energy is a privately held company incorporated in Delaware that has never built or operated a facility of any kind in the United States. Let's not be their guinea pigs.

Tracy Frisch is a freelance journalist and the coordinator of Zero Waste Warren County. She has lived in Argyle since 2004. She founded the Clean Air Action Network of Glens Falls in 2019. Her latest publication is "Something in the Water: Robert Bilott on Corporate Greed and Chemical Contamination," in the March 2022 issue of *The Sun* magazine.

Barbara Joudry is an active member of Zero Waste Warren County who is especially interested in advancing composting in the area. She left the area after graduating from Hudson Falls High School, returning three years ago upon her retirement.

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