



July 23, 2026

VIA EMAIL ONLY

The Honorable Kim Lund
Members of the Bellingham City Council

Re: Clarifying Staff Communications Regarding Earthcare's Bethel, PA Facility

Dear Mayor Lund and Members of the City Council:

The undersigned write on behalf of Sierra Club Mt. Baker Group, Whatcom Environmental Council, and RE Sources. Our combined membership in Bellingham numbers in the thousands. Our organizations also participate in the Sludge Coalition, multiple individuals and organizations who, over the better part of the last two years, have tried to work with the City to retire Post Point's ancient incinerators and eliminate their harmful emissions from Bellingham's air. (<https://www.re-sources.org/initiative/upgrading-wastewater-infrastructure-at-post-point/#section-2>)

On July 8, 2026, an article in the Salish Current ("Current Article") discussed Public Work's presentation last month to City Council regarding alternative technologies to the incinerators. (<https://salish-current.org/2026/07/08/the-future-of-bellinghams-wastewater/>) We believe that presentation lacked the context and thoroughness needed for City Council to understand that a key alternative technology is available much sooner than Public Works indicated, a problem perpetuated in the Current Article. Given the critical health and environmental concerns that could be resolved by (1) prompt incinerators shutdown, (2) interim trucking of sludge to safe landfills, and (3) expedited selection of replacement technology, we write to be sure that you understand what the June 15 presentation missed.

THE COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

Everyone agrees that the incinerators must be replaced to remove their emissions from the air we breathe. But everyone does not agree on how to do that, or how quickly. In fact, we are often at odds over what seemingly straightforward facts mean.¹

¹ In the April 27, 2026 City Council meeting several Coalition members requested a small group work session with Post Point staff to understand the basis of these factual disagreements. We have yet to hear back.

For instance, on June 15 the Public Works & Natural Resources Committee met, with the Mayor and Council present.² The Public Works Director and Deputy Director gave a presentation about a recent visit by some Public Works staff to a facility in Bethel, PA—a gasification operation run by Earthcare Solutions that processes municipal and agricultural sewage sludge.³ The presentation did make clear that the City and the Coalition do agree on at least one thing—gasification is a promising possible replacement for incineration.

But staff’s presentation lacked context and contradicted information provided to the undersigned by Earthcare’s Executive V.P. and general manager of the Bethel facility, Sean Sweeney. Clarification was later provided in two Water Resources Advisory Board (WRAB) meetings,⁴ demonstrating that inconsistencies between staff’s comments and Mr. Sweeney’s explanations were due to misunderstandings, lack of follow-up, or lack of context.

Understanding these inconsistencies is important, especially since the Current Article perpetuated them. But the June 15 presentation also exemplified staff’s public communications with Council on the facts about Post Point. From the perspective of interested parties who have spent many hours studying the issues surrounding Post Point, staff communications are sometimes less than neutral and can express a subtle influence toward pre-determined positions. Straightforward facts should be provided regardless of whether they support the City’s currently preferred solution.

In particular, communications about items as pricey and important as replacing sludge incinerators should avoid bias. City leaders should make decisions based only on complete and neutral input.

THE CONTEXT OF THE JUNE 15 PRESENTATION

Staff made six claims during the June 15 presentation that deserve further exploration.⁵

- **It was quite smelly inside the Earthcare facility**, as if gasification is extra smelly. But it should come as no surprise that sewage treatment facilities smell. And it was not mentioned that *Earthcare has no interior odor control built into the Bethel operation*. Post Point, for instance, has interior odor controls. Such controls are not a priority for the Bethel facility, because it is not in a highly populated area. During the WRAB meetings Public Works staff acknowledged that Earthcare told them it is considering odor control in its next facility.

² The presentation was repeated that night to City Council, and then again on June 23 to the Water Resources Advisory Board (WRAB), of which Rick Eggerth and Kirsten McDade, two of the undersigned, are members.

³ Some Coalition members also visited Bethel last year, including Kirsten McDade and Rodd Pemble, two of the undersigned.

⁴ On June 22 and June 23.

⁵ These points were noted but not well explored in the Current Article, which also didn’t mention the City’s refusal to consider Earthcare’s business model: DBOOM—design, build, own, operate, and maintain, as well as finance (instead of ratepayers). This position deserves in-depth exploration. Perhaps in a work session.

- **Staff were specifically advised not to let anything drip on their clothes because the smell wouldn't wash out.** It is hardly a surprise that avoiding raw sewage on clothes is a good idea. Obviously, sewage from anywhere, whether in a gasification plant or not, is best kept off clothes and people.

- **Staff were told that digested sewage (as in anaerobically or aerobically digested) was all that Bethel treated.** If true, this would be a problem for Post Point, which doesn't have digesters. But Mr. Sweeney confirmed to the undersigned that Earthcare indeed does run undigested sewage, which it prefers for various reasons, including more energy output and feedstock texture control.

- **Staff were told that Earthcare wouldn't be ready to build for three years.** But Mr. Sweeney confirmed to the undersigned that it is not Earthcare's capacity preventing construction for three years; rather, he estimated at least three to four years to permit and construct a 100-ton-per-day gasification plant. (Post Point averages 42 tons per day.)

- **Staff also emphasized that Earthcare can shut down for several weeks to repair or maintain equipment,** as its customers can truck their waste elsewhere. Per staff, the City can't do this because our waste stream isn't trucked to Post Point, and it can't be stored if the incinerators are down. This problem has solutions, however. The City could build two gasifiers, so that while one is shut down the other continues, as is now done with the incinerators. Or a loading dock could be built for interim trucking if the system shuts down. In fact, at a meeting last year with Coalition members and City government, staff admitted that if the incinerators broke down, the emergency contingency would be *trucking*.⁶

- **Finally, during a visit to Lynnwood's wastewater treatment plant, staff saw sludge trucks leaking and leaving a trail.** (This relates to the possible trucking of Bellingham's sludge to a landfill following shutdown of the incinerators, as the Sludge Coalition has requested.) This also is a non-issue, as leaky trucks are avoidable. Trucks that are better for hauling sludge than others can be found. And Mr. Sweeney saw a possible dewatering issue. That is, sludge should first have more water squeezed out of it (also decreasing weight and increasing the amount of sludge per truck).

With these claims removed from the conversation, what remains is staff's ready agreement that Public Works is quite impressed with Earthcare's operations. Not that Earthcare's technology is better than other gasifiers—the technology has been around for years—but that its SCADA, or Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition, is better than anyone else's. (SCADA is software/hardware systems that allow monitoring, data gathering, and process control in real time.) Earthcare excels at SCADA.

CONCLUSION

With full context, and answers to unasked questions which could have been obtained during staff's visit to Bethel, none of the June 15 concerns are in fact issues worth concern. Smell is subject to odor control, avoiding raw sewage is a good idea anywhere, Earthcare

⁶ Another puzzling inconsistency that might be clarified with a work session.

does process undigested material, incoming waste can be managed in a shutdown, leaks from trucks can be fixed, and Earthcare is ready to build once design is approved and permitted. Perhaps most importantly, *the Coalition and staff see gasification as a strong contender for replacement technology*. That should be the takeaway.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Rick Eggerth
Conservation Chair
Sierra Club Mt. Baker Group

Kirsten McDade
North Sound Waterkeeper
RE Sources

Rodd Pemble
President
Whatcom Environmental Council

Cc: Sean Sweeney, Executive V.P., Earthcare Solutions
Sierra Club Mt. Baker Group Executive Committee
Whatcom Environmental Council Board of Directors
Ander Russell, Co-Executive Director, RE Sources
Sludge Coalition members