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SPSA briefed on Frederick Sortation testing results

SPSA hears strong early results from Frederick AI-driven sortation plant.

Ed Pugh

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Southeastern Public Service Authority board members got a progress check Tuesday on the Frederick Sortation Facility's acceptance testing, a key step in the authority's new waste-supply contract and a sign the regional system is moving closer to shifting tons away from the landfill.

The push to launch alternative waste disposal comes as SPSA faces a looming capacity crunch at the Regional Landfill in Suffolk. Federal permitting documents tied to the landfill expansion state the existing landfill, based on current and anticipated tonnage, would run out of capacity in 2027, forcing the authority to secure additional long-term disposal options for its member cities and counties

Under SPSA's alternative waste disposal contract with AMP, the system is built around pulling value out of the trash stream before it ever reaches the landfill, using camera- and AI-driven sorting to separate recyclables and organics. SPSA has said the agreement guarantees that half of the waste delivered to the facilities will be diverted from the landfill, while also increasing the region's recycling rate to 20% from a baseline SPSA has described as about 7%.

For local governments, the benefit is twofold: stretching landfill life while stabilizing long-term disposal planning. In an October 2025 briefing to Chesapeake officials, SPSA described the contract as guaranteeing a 50% diversion rate — including 20% recyclables and 30% organics — and tied the rollout to a July 1, 2026, start date, part of what SPSA has framed as a strategy to reduce long-run pressure on landfill capacity and improve recycling performance across the region.

Executive Director Dennis Bagley told the board that testing tied to the first "ramp up" of the Frederick facility — roughly 54,000 tons per year — "was completed on the 29th of January," and he noted that SPSA's resident engineer was on site for the full test.

Bagley said the facility could handle more material now, but SPSA's current budget is aligned with the contract's ramp schedule. "While they could take the additional 54,000 tons today, we can't afford to take it to them, because the money's not in the budget until July," Bagley said. "So we're kind of in a catch 22 — they're ready, but we're not." He said the second milestone is tied to a larger ramp to 108,000 tons that "will start on July one."

Senior Vice President Robert B. Gardner of SCS Engineers, which provided independent engineer oversight, told board members the three-day performance test ran Jan. 27-29 and focused on throughput, downtime and material recovery at the upgraded facility. Gardner said the test involved "monitoring all the facility operations, including the throughput, the downtime and material recovery," and he framed it as "one of the first key milestones" under the Waste Supply and Service Agreement.

According to the independent engineer's report, the acceptance test followed procedures outlined in the agreement and began each day with a cleared tipping floor, followed by depositing "Processable Waste" in preparation for the run. The goal was to process about 170 tons of test material per day within a maximum 10-hour test day, with trailer weights recorded and matched to trailer numbers. Non-processable waste was identified during unloading and by the loader operator, segregated, and recorded at day's end as "Deducted Volume," the report states. The report also notes that scales used during the test were calibrated, and that material streams were tracked through internal trailer documents reviewed by the independent engineer team at the end of each test day.

Gardner told the board the recovered streams included biochar-eligible material, mixed recyclables and a refuse-derived fuel product. The independent engineer's report notes that the RDF would initially be shipped to a waste-to-energy facility in Baltimore. The report also states that recovered recyclables would be shipped to the AMP Sortation Cleveland facility for further processing until the Frederick MRF is upgraded later in 2026.

The results presented showed diversion performance well above the contract's 50% target each day. The report's summary lists Day 1 diversion at 74.8%, Day 2 at 82.0% and Day 3 at 77.6%, each marked as achieving the performance target. Gardner told the board the "diversion numbers were really high" and that the facility "met their overall goals and what they were required to demonstrate."

According to the report, the sortation facility ran well during each of the three Test Days, with total downtime of 133 minutes across the test period. Of that, 111 minutes were associated with swapping out the biochar-eligible material trailer, averaging 37 minutes per day, according to the report.

The independent engineer's report flagged several operational observations to watch as the facility scales up, including the possibility that an SSI reducer could become a bottleneck and might need an upgrade if it limits throughput. The report also suggests considering ways to reduce downtime tied to biochar trailer swaps, including options that would avoid shutting down the sorting line during the swap. Additional notes include plastic film carrying over into the recovered ferrous metal bin, planned upgrades to fire detection and suppression on the tipping floor, and a Virginia Department of Environmental Quality inspection conducted on the last day of the test.