

# Teamsters advocating for better Sonoma County garbage operations

By KEVIN MCCALLUM

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | June 28, 2017

The union that recently organized workers at The Ratto Group, Sonoma County's dominant garbage hauler, is joining forces with environmental and social justice groups to push the county toward a goal of zero waste.

Concerned about their futures in the county's fast-shifting garbage landscape, Ratto employees last month voted overwhelmingly to be represented by the Teamsters.

The powerful union had tried twice before to organize workers at the Santa Rosa-based company, but they failed following past opposition from management, said Mike Yates, president of Teamsters Local 665.

This time, however, the questions raised by auditors and regulators about Ratto's operations — combined with the company's agreement to be sold to San Francisco-based Recology — turned the tide strongly in favor of the union, Yates said.

"The workers were feeling uncertain about what their futures were going to be," Yates said.

The drivers, mechanics, recycling and clerical workers employed by The Ratto Group, whose local subsidiary is known as North Bay Corp., voted 271 to 31 in favor of union representation in an election monitored by the National Labor Relations Board. Including managers, the company employs an estimated 440 workers.

Now the Teamsters are waiting to see whether the sale to Recology goes through, and who will win the bidding for the two contracts up for grabs — Santa Rosa and Windsor.

Recology, initially stunned that it was not selected as a finalist for Santa Rosa's contract, has since been asked to return to the negotiating table, said Eric Potashner, a vice president at the company.

The closed-door negotiations are going very well, Potashner said. "We feel pretty confident that we're on the same page," he said.

In April, Houston-based giant Waste Management and San Jose-based GreenWaste Recovery were finalists for Santa Rosa's lucrative garbage contract. But Deputy City Manager Gloria Hurtado said things have evolved since then.

"We have discontinued conversations with some bidders and we have embarked on conversations with others," Hurtado said, declining to name the companies with which the city is negotiating.

In Windsor, the Town Council earlier this month selected GreenWaste Recovery, despite the fact the company has not named where it will have a local recycling center. Its previous two proposed locations in Santa Rosa and Petaluma ran into opposition. Rates in Windsor are slated to increase 32 percent in the new contract.

The Teamsters are now prepping for contract negotiations with whoever purchases or wins the garbage contracts in the eight Sonoma County cities and unincorporated areas where Ratto operates.

As part of that effort, the union has teamed up with a coalition of local groups to advocate for better conditions for workers and more environmentally friendly waste-recovery practices.

“Sonoma County should be a leader in recycling and processing of solid waste, but we’re not even hitting the state-mandated targets, which is ridiculous,” Yates said.

Yates acknowledges that teaming up with groups like the Sierra Club is a new experience for him, but he said environmental and labor goals align on the issue of waste.

Yates will be making a presentation about the union’s role in raising the working conditions, salaries and benefits of waste workers and how that connects to zero waste initiatives in a public forum in Santa Rosa today. The event, called “Good Jobs and Zero Waste,” takes place at 6:30 p.m. at the Christ Church United Methodist, 1717 Yulupa Ave.

Also presenting is Loren Ahkiam, senior researcher at the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a labor-based nonprofit. Ahkiam will provide an overview of zero waste campaigns and policies in California.

Sponsored by North Bay Jobs with Justice, the event is free and open to the public.

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