

Sweet deal smelled awful

Inquirer Editorial

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A sludge plant whose stench was once the unwelcoming smell motorists got anytime they crossed the Platt Bridge near the airport is the perfect metaphor for the malodorous deal involving City Hall insiders that led to the facility's replacement.

A less fragrant process to turn human waste into fertilizer and fuel has cleared the air of that stench, but the smell left by all the influence-peddling that preceded the deal yet clings to Mayor Nutter, who did what he could to inject some integrity into the contract but could have stood on higher ground morally had he rejected it outright.

In an article Wednesday, reporter Mark Fazlollah detailed how Houston-based Synagro Technologies Inc. won the contract to replace the city's obsolete South Philadelphia solid-waste treatment plant with one that wouldn't smell and pollute quite so much.

The technology seems to be working. The overhauled plant is saving the city money. And Synagro has cleaned up the way it uses outside consultants. But how this developed just shows how much more must be done to rid Philadelphia of the pervasive, corrosive, back-scratching culture that Nutter was elected to eradicate.

The deal that started under the administration of former Mayor John F. Street appeared to be stalled until Fareed Ahmed, a convicted heroin dealer turned vote broker and political insider, set up a 2007 meeting with Nutter on behalf of a Synagro consultant from Atlanta, Hiram Hicks.

Nutter had just won the Democratic primary, which made the then-councilman a lock to win the mayoralty. However, this is the same Nutter who in his campaign had promised to end the era of governance for the profit of a few elites, so one must wonder why he would even meet with Ahmed — but he did. Nutter supposedly told Ahmed he would look into the contract after he was seated.

Once in office, the Nutter administration negotiated a \$590 million, 23-year contract to replace the sludge plant, which was in violation of the federal Clean Air Act.

But when Nutter later found out about a Detroit bribery case involving another Synagro consultant, he had the city's chief integrity officer, Joan Markman, scrub the contract.

Markman found \$9.2 million in payments for Hicks and tossed those payments from the deal. She also built into the revised contract strong oversight for the city, including the ability to audit Synagro's financial dealings and learn who its subcontractors are.

The details surrounding the initial awarding of the contract were revealed in an opinion issued by U.S. District Judge Stewart Dalzell in a lawsuit filed by Hicks to recover the \$9.2 million he says Synagro promised him. Dalzell described the deal as "a primer in how to procure multimillion-dollar service contracts with the city of Philadelphia."

Philadelphians have to hope the judge is wrong, and that this deal was an anomaly with roots in a past that is disappearing, albeit too slowly, with Nutter as mayor. It is disturbing that the mayor didn't recoil when he first got wind of the characters and manipulations involved in this project. But the fact that he and Markman did act is praiseworthy.