

Uncertain waste treatment

Jakarta has regretfully failed to significantly move on its bid to modernize solid waste management. Instead, the city authorities remain baffled with the long-standing problem of transporting waste to a treatment facility in a neighboring city. Deputy Governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama on Thursday met with 25 trash-transportation operators to formulate a new mechanism to carry the trash. Ahok is unhappy with the current system — each truck only transports trash once a day.

Initially, Ahok proposed payment based on trips or tonnage transported by trash operators to replace the current system, but later he approved a new mechanism in which each operator was responsible for transporting all garbage taken from the likes of households and rivers in a certain territory. The new scheme will be formalized in a gubernatorial decree.

Waste transportation is vital for a big city like Jakarta. Mounting trash is stacked in every corner of the capital, spoiling its appearance and sparking health problems. The new system may end the trash crisis, but only temporarily. Like other metropolitan cities, Jakarta cannot delay efforts to modernize its waste treatment facilities. For decades, Jakarta has relied on the Bantar Gebang dump site in neighboring Bekasi, West Java.

Such dependence often sparks problems, particularly when the Bekasi government refused to accept trucks carrying waste from Jakarta for various reasons. In 2001, for example, the Bekasi city authorities closed the dump site in protest over environmental problems. The facility was reopened only after the central government mediated talks between the two neighbors.

After three governors — Sutiyoso, Fauzi Bowo and Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, Jakarta has been unable to modernize its waste management system. Under Fauzi, the city administration proposed an intermediate treatment facility (ITF) in Cakung Cilincing in East Jakarta, and in Sunter and Marunda, both in North Jakarta, with the aim of converting waste into energy.

The ITF in Cakung Cilincing started operations in August 2011, but its capacity had not increased from the original 400 tons per day, insignificant compared to the 6,500 tons of waste produced in the city daily.

Ahok has not yet talked, at least publicly, about a plan to build modern waste treatment facilities, which will offer a sustainable solution to the chronic problem. That Ahok claims to know nothing about the progress of ITF Sunter and ITF Marunda projects is testament to the city government's lack of awareness about waste management.

The current leaders of Jakarta should not allow the unfinished plan to build a modern waste treatment facility go nowhere. The capital has allocated Rp 1.38 trillion (US\$121 million) to waste treatment this year. What matters the most, however, is not money, but the will to solve the waste problem once and for all.