

OUTREACH TO HANDS OUT

A municipal recycling coordinator's guide is offered on how to move beyond basic community outreach, and express the importance of waste diversion to elected officials.

By Keefe Harrison & Elizabeth Bedard



Successful community recycling program managers understand that outreach is a smart way to ensure strong participation and low contamination levels. With those two components, recycling programs can work toward stronger economic efficiency. While this is a basic understanding among recycling coordinators, surprisingly few communities actually focus such outreach beyond basic appeals to households. Even fewer set their sights on elected officials.

Recent economic woes have shattered the idea that, come budget-cut time, it's best to fly below the radar. Recycling programs that successfully weather market dips, like the one currently affecting us, often rely on their local elected and appointed officials to help them through, or at least not cut them out. Gaining support from elected officials sounds good; but making it happen is a little harder. Fortunately, it isn't impossible.

Beyond the landfill

Considering recycling's broad impact and its affects on communities

For years, we as the recycling industry have promoted recycling to the tune of "save the landfill." That message works for communities short on cell space and anxious for quick fixes, but loses steam over the long run. Framing recycling's direct relationship to the development of materials for manufacturing can be more effective.

For cities and counties supported by manufacturing, elected officials are often very open to ways to better support those sources

of local jobs and tax revenue. Showing how your community's collection of recyclables supports cost-effective local supplies of feedstock can strike a positive cord with your representatives. To better drive your message home, some successful programs bring in local or regional manufacturing industry representatives to help prove your case. Recycling trade organizations can help organize said partnerships.

Many communities and states are looking for ways to encourage green jobs to move into the area. Too often, the association of "green" relates more to clean energy production than the already established, poised-to-grow recycling industry. North Carolina is one such example. The state's Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (DPPEA) understands that the search for economic development makes this the perfect time to discuss recycling. The DPPEA's chief of Community and Business Assistance with the Division of Pollution Prevention, Scott Mow, sums up the connection, "Although almost everyone is fixated on renewable energy, recycling is the original green jobs creator. If coordinators can help elected officials understand both the track record and potential for recycling, in order to grow the economy, they could win broader support for their programs." Fortunately a quick Web search will yield many supporting reports and figures to help support that claim. Tools such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 4's *Municipal Government Toolkit* relay economic information related to jobs, and beyond, and can be a source for pertinent information. For example, "The recycling

industry in South Carolina has grown from 26,537 employees in 1995, to a total of 37,440 employed in 2005, with \$6.5 billion in economic impact. This contributed \$69 million in state tax revenue and is estimated to grow by 12 percent in the next five years." This toolkit then goes a couple steps further to outline ways to put such economic information to use on the local recycling program level.

Those sorts of figures aren't in the Southeast alone. One can find similar perspectives from the Midwest. The Illinois Recycling Association reports that recycling in Illinois is a \$12.3-billion-per-year industry, employing more than 56,000 people. The Michigan Recycling Coalition reports that materials recovery results in a total employment of 5,028 persons, with an annual payroll of more than \$137 million.

And, on the West Coast, we see even more material. The *2001 Economic Impact of Waste Disposal and Diversion in California Report* notes that, when material is diverted rather than disposed in California, total sales and value-added impacts more than double. But that's not all. Output impacts and total income impacts nearly double, and the jobs

Table 1 | Energy conservation through recycling

Material	Amount recycled (in tons)	Energy conserved
Plastic	17	26,040 gallons of gasoline
Scrap metal	61	60,670 pounds of coal
Steel	13	60-watt bulb running for 684,840 hours

Source: Northeast Resource Recovery Association, 2009

impact nearly doubles as well.

Building trust

How to get an audience with your elected official

The continuous demands on elected officials' time limits their availability to recycling staff. Consequently, understanding what's important to them and how you are connected can help you get onto the agenda at the next council meeting.

It is important to remember that both recycling staff and elected officials are

"public officials" charged with maintaining and improving public activities. You are on the same team with the same goals! Additionally, consider that elected officials are not only important as decision makers, but also as recycling program users.

Recycling is an important issue to the American public. A recent Glass Packaging Institute (GPI) poll revealed that 81.1 percent of American adults recycle something in their own home. In addition, the GPI study divulged that 93.9 percent of Americans think recycling is good for the environment. Further, America Recycles

Day research showed that 76 percent of Americans believe recycling at home can reduce their contribution to global warming, and 80 percent would support mandatory recycling. These national surveys show that the public, who put elected officials in office, care about recycling. Elected officials care about what's important to their constituents.

Targeting the demographic

What to say once you have your audience
 Congratulations – you've succeeded in scheduling a presentation to your elected officials. What should you say once you get their attention? Your overall goal is for them to understand the importance of recycling to the community. In addition, if they become vested in the program, you've hit a homerun.

Remember, their time is limited and very valuable. Your presentation will need to be concise, to the point, with limited text and lots of visuals. Your message needs to outline the community benefits of the recycling program, such as jobs created, energy conserved and tax impact. Table 1 is

an example of the energy conserved from a New England community's recycling program.

The Northeast Recycling Council's Environmental Benefits Calculator can help any U.S. community, county or university calculate statistics like the ones above. It can also calculate reductions in greenhouse gas production as a result of recycling, develop energy comparison charts and compute landfill space saved. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's WASTE Reduction Model (WARM) can also compute other climate impact savings through recycling.

Many times, elected officials don't think of recycling as a form of waste management, so it's important to remind them that there are only three ways to handle society's discards: Buried, burned or reused. If recycling is a lower cost alternative, for example, disposal costs are \$65 per ton and recycling costs are \$20 per ton, don't hesitate to emphasize this important fact.

Providing each elected official with a brochure, event summary or bulleted list of program success will allow you to highlight specifics. In addition, since most

people are visual learners, it's also a great way to connect them with the program. Further, it varies your presentation and places the general public's brochure directly in the hands of the elected officials.

When asked a question, knowing the answer is rewarding, especially as an elected official. By sharing the answers to the public's most often asked questions, you'll educate your elected officials on the details of the recycling program and empower them to answer questions from their constituents. During your presentation, show the community's recycling Web site to emphasize that it is available and what it looks like. Discussing several of the program's annual goals (for example, adding two new schools, distributing 200 additional curbside bins and increasing recycling by five percent) engages the officials and provides you with a rationale for future program updates.

Remember that sometimes your message can be stronger when delivered from an already trusted resource. Making sure your city or county managers have the same information can ensure a steady course.

Keeping the communication gates open

One community's approach to building a long-term relationship with elected officials

A long-term relationship is often built on knowledge, trust and enthusiasm. And, when planning for support that extends through election cycles, effective communities rely on those three components. Thanks to a grant from the North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance, the Centralina Council of Governments (CCOG) has established just that sort of detailed plan. Ideally positioned to support elected officials, CCOG is now conducting a pilot approach geared specifically at harnessing the support of elected officials.

In August 2008, the CCOG created a working group to study recycling in its nine county region of Central, Southern North Carolina (i.e., Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union Counties). The group's first task was to develop an assessment of the state of recycling in the region, including the economic, environmental

and sustainability impacts of recycling and best practices. CCOG reports that there are more than 125 recycling related businesses, with close to 3,700 employees, in the region.

Project Leader and CCOG Assistant Director Martha Lide saw this report not just as a product but as a team building

Too often, the association of "green" relates more to clean energy production than the already established, poised-to-grow recycling industry.

and education exercise, too. "By setting up a committee of 30 regional officials, including landfill operators, recycling coordinators and industry representatives, we worked to strengthen regional networks while, at the same time, gathering material for our report," notes Lide. Quarterly meetings of the group highlight potential

for cross community action, be it cooperation on the sale of material or coordination of outreach events. A steering committee of 11 elected officials helps to not only guide CCOG directive but, more importantly, build stakeholders. Lide continues, "Our elected steering committee has developed real ownership and has helped to propose realistic solutions to improve recycling that can be implemented in the local jurisdictions."

One of the group's recommendations was the need to better educate local elected officials on the benefits of recycling. The CCOG received a grant from the North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention to develop a "Community Recycling Simulation and Workshop" as a pilot project. The idea of the simulation is to educate policymakers in a fun, interactive way so that the experience is memorable. The simulation, scheduled for November 30th in Gaston County, North Carolina, will engage elected officials in problem solving exercises designed around increasing recycling possibilities for the region. Potential exercises include the implementation of a pay-as-you-throw program, the coordination of educational programs countywide,

the development of a regional materials recovery facility or the implementation of construction and demolition debris recycling system.

The approximately 60 elected officials who will participate in the simulation will immediately see the impact of their decisions in terms of job growth, increased life of their landfills, environmental impacts, revenue saved from tipping fees, and revenue generated by job and business growth. With the use of strong visuals, clever training aids, and plenty of charts and graphs, the goal is to create a memorable meeting that builds connections, while also educating about the issues.

Policymakers will be given tools they can implement that will affect their ability to "win" the simulation. These tools might include modification of methods and amounts charged for solid waste disposal and recycling, ordinances that require businesses to recycle, changes to collection contracts, new collection methods, modifying tipping fees, and incentives to create businesses. Policymakers might face challenges, such as angry citizens, citations for landfilling illegal items, the need to expand their landfill, or an environmental cleanup. It's intended the simulation will demon-

strate the positive effects and efficiencies from collaboration among jurisdictions. "Winners" in the simulation would have jobs created, see landfills remain open, and would generate or preserve revenue for the jurisdiction.

After this initial pilot, CCOG will evaluate the process and, if successful, the

It is important to remember that both recycling staff and elected officials are "public officials" charged with maintaining and improving public activities.

agency will look for ways to conduct similar sessions in their region.

Tomorrow's support starts today

Local action feeds whole industry support
Not all communities have the CCOG's

ability to conduct such a comprehensive outreach plan. But, even the busiest of recycling programs have time to communicate successes to their elected and appointed decision makers. Comparing local numbers to regional economic impact statements will help begin the dialog that recycling is about feedstock development, good local jobs, and smart energy and resource use. Developing that sort of understanding is deeply valuable, and not just for a community, but for our recycling industry as a whole. ♻️

Keefe Harrison is a recycling contractor for Booz Allen Hamilton, a project coordinator for the Southeast Recycling Development Council, and runs the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers' Into the Bin and Back Again Web seminar and workshop series. She can be contacted at (864) 222-2997 or postconsumerplastic@gmail.com. Elizabeth Bedard is program manager for the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers' Rigid Plastics Recycling Program. Formerly, Liz was director of the New Hampshire Governor's Recycling Program, the executive director of the Northeast Resource Recovery Association, and a former elected official. She can be contacted at ebedard18@gmail.com.