With the continued budgetary constraints hitting all levels of government, collecting used textiles is a strategy that more and more communities are using to decrease the volume of their trash and save money on disposal fees. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, every person in the U.S. generates approximately 82 pounds of textiles per year. In that same EPA report, it’s estimated that only 15 percent of the textiles generated nationwide get collected for reuse or recycling. This means that 85 percent of used textiles are reaching landfills and incinerators, at significant cost.

To illustrate, use the formulas in Table 1 on the next page to calculate how much a community is paying to throw away textiles – the cost can be stunning. For example, one Vermont town – with 10,000 people and $96 per ton landfill tip fee – spends approximately $33,456 per year to dispose of used textiles. But, there is an alternative to disposal that all can benefit from – the U.S. has a robust infrastructure to collect, distribute and recycle these materials.

Existing textiles collection infrastructure

Box collection system – I’m sure readers have seen the large metal collection boxes on the side of the road with signs that say something like “Drop used clothes here.” This type of textiles collection has been used for many years and is dependent upon individuals dropping off their filled bags on the way to work or when running errands. Those boxes are commonly owned and managed by charitable organizations. Due to the growing volume of used textiles in this country, the markets have grown accordingly and many for-profit companies are now also collecting textiles in roadside boxes.

Secondhand stores – The large secondhand stores are still run by charitable organizations. Most use a dual approach for collecting the textiles with roadside bins and drop-offs directly at their stores.

Textile reuse and recycling markets

According to the Council for Textile Recycling (CTR) and the
Sidebar 1 | Importance of vendor transparency

Over the last several years, there has been bad press about textiles collection operations that are not doing what they say they are with the collected textiles. One way to avoid discrepancies related to your program is to require complete transparency from your vendor up front. You should be able to find out what they do with the collected textiles, where they sell the collected textiles, and if they are partnering with a charity or business and how.

SMART has addressed this issue by requiring each of its members that operate collection bin services to abide by a code of conduct (http://tinyurl.com/SMART-Vendor) that includes the requirement of complete transparency.

Table 1 | Calculate the amount your community spends on textiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calculation</th>
<th>Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82 lbs. of textiles/person x XX people in community</td>
<td>XX lbs. of textiles generated/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX lbs. x 85 percent (estimated rate being disposed</td>
<td>XX lbs. of textiles being thrown out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX lbs./2,000 lbs. = XX tons of textiles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX tons x $XX/ton tipping fee = $XX/year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Textiles – more than just the clothes off your back

Today’s definition of textiles has dramatically changed from the one used years ago. It now includes new, old, stained, ripped or torn clothing and leather products, shoes, belts, beddings, draperies and slipcovers, as well as stuffed animals.

Starting a textiles collection program

Step 1. Develop a plan – When first thinking about developing a textiles collection program in your community, the following questions will help you define the plan:

- Does your community have an ordinance regarding collection boxes?
- Does it matter to you if the entity you work with to collect the textiles is a nonprofit or for-profit?
- Do you expect to gain revenue from the collected textiles?
- Do you expect data on the amount of textiles collected? If so, how frequently?
- How often would you want the collection box emptied?
- Where might you place the collection box so that it is in a well-lit area and easily accessible to residents? Do you have the permission of the property owner or supervisor to place the box at that location?
- Is one box enough for your community?
- What organizations, institutions, or groups can you partner with to help spread the word to residents about the importance of diverting textiles to the collection box(es) so that the town can save money on disposal and be more environmentally friendly?

Step 2. Find companies or organizations that collect textiles in your area

There are many ways to find the entities that collect textiles in your area. Here are a few strategies to use:

- Search the Internet under “textile collection” or “recycling textiles” for your municipality or state.
- Go directly to the websites for collection entities you are aware of (e.g., Goodwill Industries, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Baystate Textiles, etc.).
- Call the recycling coordinator for your municipality and say you are looking for any companies or organizations collecting textiles. If you are in an area with no recycling coordinator, contact your state’s environmental agency and ask to speak with someone in the recycling department that deals with textiles.

Step 3. Conduct due diligence on potential vendors

Once you know who services your area, it is wise to do some due diligence on the company or organization that you are thinking about engaging in an agreement with. You want to be sure that the operation is reputable and that it meets your expectations and requirements, as detailed in Sidebar 1.

Strategies for researching information on non-
Table 2 | Textiles reuse and recycling resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Name</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of International Recycling/Textiles Division</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bir.org">www.bir.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council for Textile Recycling</td>
<td><a href="http://www.weardonaterecycle.org">www.weardonaterecycle.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Materials &amp; Recycled Textiles Association (SMART)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.smartasn.org">www.smartasn.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 4. Develop and sign a contract agreement with the selected vendor**
Once you have completed steps 1-3 and feel confident that you have the information you need, contact the company or nonprofit you are interested in working with. You can then negotiate the details of your agreement. It is important to have a signed copy of the agreement for your records and to refer to later on. Once you have that in hand, it’s time to schedule the start date for your collection program.

**Step 5. Spreading the word**
Now that the program has started, it is time to let residents know about it and that it’s a money-saving strategy for the town (and taxpayers) that also supports environmental stewardship via material reuse and resource conservation. Some low-cost outreach strategies are:
- Announcements in local newspapers and on local television and radio stations.
- Outreach to schools, churches, nonprofit organizations and civic groups.
- Facebook and Twitter announcements.
- Add the information to recycling lists and announcements.

Once a textiles recovery program is up-and-running, it can be an essential part of a community’s waste diversion efforts, one that can not just save taxpayer money, but also add to any given program’s bottom line.

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