St. Johnsbury Academy was recently nominated by Tara Robinson Holt for the Northeast Recycling Council’s Environmental Sustainability Leadership Award. This is a new awards program that will honor individuals and organizations for the impact they have made on sustainable materials management.

Holt worked as a Solid Waste Implementation Plan, (SWIP) Outreach specialist. A SWIP Outreach Specialist supports Businesses and Institutions as they work to meet the requirements of their town’s SWIP, and Act 148, Vermont’s Universal Recycling Law. A SWIP is the plan that towns create and submit to the State of Vermont outlining the work they will undertake to meet or exceed mandates, expectations and best practices in Materials Management. It can be dry work to some, but to her, it was fascinating and very essential. Few acts as a person and community member can have such far-reaching impacts on a global scale as can practices around consumption and materials management, or, in plain speak – what we choose to purchase or consume and what we do with our stuff when we are done using it.

In the fall of 2016 Holt met with St. Johnsbury Academy Sustainability chair, James Bentley. SJA, by way of Bentley’s leadership, has been focused on responsible materials management since 2008, including composting of organics and a comprehensive recycling program. In 2016, the Academy began a project called “Waste Free Wednesday,” a school outreach program in which students were encouraged to consider and plan for what foods they will actually consume in an effort to reduce the amount of discarded, or wasted, food. To begin, they asked the essential question, “Why Do We Need to Lower Food Waste @ SJA?” and developed the following responses:

1. Food Waste is an Environmental Challenge
   • Organic waste is the largest portion of landfill waste in Vermont and in the United States.
• Organic waste that decomposes in landfills releases methane into the atmosphere and accelerates climate change.

• Food waste doesn’t just waste food: it wastes the resources used to grow, process, transport, store, and prepare that food (water fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, gasoline, diesel, electricity, propane, time, and labor).

2. Food Waste is an Economic Challenge

• Food waste costs the school and its students and their families’ money. Money spent on wasted food limits how much the school can spend on better ingredients and local foods produced by local farmers and local businesses.

3. Food Waste is a Social Challenge

Nearly 80,000 Vermonters live in food insecure households; 20,000+ of those are children under 18. Sixty-seven percent of students at the St. Johnsbury School receive free or reduced lunch. Approximately 150 students at St. Johnsbury Academy receive free or reduced lunch.

Statistics for the 2015-2016 school year, taken from the dining hall at St. Johnsbury Academy are as follows:

• Average Weight of Dining Hall Plate Waste per Day: 278 lbs.

• Weight of SJA Compost: 146,016 lbs. per year

• Annual Cost of Dining Hall Plate Waste: $148,776

• Dining Hall Plate Waste as percent of SJA Food Purchased: 19 percent

Armed with this data, students and staff set out to make appreciable changes in their consumption patterns that would have measurable impacts on not only the school’s bottom line, but also on fellow community members and the efficacy of our local food supply.

Over the course of the project, the students and staff were able to shave off 26.72 pounds of food waste per day, a reduction of 9.61 percent. This reduction is the equivalent of 764 meals saved from the waste stream during trial period, a total of 29 project days. Managing the waste stream before consumable goods are actually a waste product give more life to our resources, and mean less embodied energy is required to deal with what we “throw
away.” After all, there really is no such thing as “away.” As their data shows, the economic impact to their own bottom line alone is reason enough to incentivize creating less waste to manage in the end.

St. Johnsbury’s Solid Waste Implementation Plan, along with other resources to aid residents and businesses with Recycling, Hazardous Waste and other Materials Management topics, can be found on St. Johnsbury’s web page, www.stjvt.org.

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