

Beyond Disposal and Recycling: Preventing Waste Generation

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It has been over 20 years since I first walked into the Burlington Landfill. The leachate was oozing into the wetlands, methane was migrating into adjacent homes, and it looked like the seagulls were holding a national convention. The best part of the trip was when I asked the attendant where he secured his tipping fees at the end of the day. He told me he took the money bag home at night and stored it in his freezer. When I asked him if he was in balance he replied that he had taken a loan to buy a fishing rod and would be in balance on payday. The experience I had that day was similar to hundreds of solid waste facilities across the country. It signaled the need for a new paradigm in how solid waste would be managed in the future.

In the last 20 years tremendous progress has been made across the country to improve solid waste and recycling. Old landfills were capped, new lined

landfills were constructed, recycling rates have improved, there are more professional solid waste people in the industry today, and the technology to manage waste has improved tremendously.

Solid waste practices in Vermont improved significantly with the passage of Act 78 in the late 80s, which created solid waste districts, a move that ensured regional responsibility for solid waste. Since the inception of Act 78, solid waste districts have been formed, landfills have been capped, and recycling rates have improved and are now averaging around 30 percent statewide. I can remember during the early debates on Act 78 my concern was that while it was important to think locally about solid waste, many of the decisions made to manage and reduce waste are driven by economics at a scale larger than many of the districts in Vermont. My sense at the time was that there should only be two or three landfills in the state, recycling and transfer centers could be handled at the regional level, and that the state should play a more prominent role in bringing regions together to achieve economies of scale and fair pricing when it came to disposal and recycling opportunities.

In many ways the private sector has come in and filled that void. There are very few landfills in Vermont and recycling opportunities are for the most part being handled by private industry or agreements between multiple districts.

Since the 80s the disposal of waste and the management of recycling have grown into regional, national and international markets. In New England, with our small geographic area, a great deal of our solid waste is hauled to states like Pennsylvania, New York and other states west of us where large, lined landfills have been constructed. With the development of Third World countries and their need for recycling materials, the market has responded by developing MERFS and the international trading of recycling commodities is growing.

I think if someone were to give those who have worked in the solid waste business a report card for the work that has been completed over the last 20 years the grades would be high. But at the bottom of the report card there would be a note stating that although your work has been good, you have just begun the journey to reduce and re-use our waste.

It is my belief that we are about to enter a new environmental era in this country, and how we manage solid-waste will play a prominent role in this new environmental age that we are about to enter. The fear and reality of Global Warming has turned us on our heads. Everywhere you go and whoever you talk to Global Warming becomes part of the conversation. The central theme of these conversations is whether we have the ability to create lifestyles that reduce carbon dioxide and are sustainable.

Well, how does solid waste fit with Global Warming and what are we going to do about it? If I had that answer I wouldn't be talking to you today, but would be off somewhere writing a book. But let me provide you with some observations and thoughts of where I believe we need to go over the next 20 years.

1. We must continue to improve our recycling efforts to reduce trash.

This is going to require the adoption of new technologies and to investigate state and regional options to manage our recyclables.

2. We should be careful on how much new landfill space we build. I made this point twenty years ago and feel the same today. Landfills

are a necessary evil for three reasons 1. They are complex to manage from an environmental point of view 2. They represent a society that wastes 3. Landfills are expensive to build with high fixed costs regardless of the amount of trash that is disposed in them. What this means is that if they are not constructed at the appropriate scale the disposal cost per ton will go up with every ton that is eliminated, thus creating a disincentive to reduce waste. Before building new landfills we need to make sure that the economic model is pro-recycling and not pro disposal.

3. The management of solid waste in the future is going to be more complex than ever. We are currently frozen at 30- to 50-percent recycling rates and continue to see the amount of solid waste growing. In my view it is ultimately going to take national legislation to start reducing waste at the source and providing companies with incentives to reduce packaging or to pay premiums for producing waste. We need to study more closely what many of the European countries are doing to reduce waste.
4. The solutions to our solid waste problems in the future will not come from just science and engineering. Social, economic, and public

- policy will play a major role in coming up with the next generation of solutions to reduce solid waste.
5. We need to think about programs and approaches to reduce solid waste not only at the local level but at the state, regional, national, and international levels to make this a reality.
 6. Education needs to play a prominent role in how we take responsibility for our waste. Global Warming becomes the perfect catalyst to associate the reduction of solid waste to the reduction of carbon. I was at a junior high school last week where students reduced solid waste at the school in half and used the savings to build a basketball court. They not only reduced carbon, but they improved their quality of life by building a new basketball court.
 7. It is going to be imperative to form partnerships with all of those involved in both the production and reduction of solid waste. I'm convinced that, as never before, businesses want to do the right thing when it comes to recycling. The challenge is to find ways to reduce waste while at the same time demonstrating the investment made to reduce waste is a good one. We need to work more closely with companies in the recycling business to really understand what is and

- isn't feasible when it comes to recycling. Economies of scale play a major role when you are looking at recycling and processing centers.
8. Vermonters are in a perfect position to help set a new foundation for the management and reduction of solid waste on a local state and national level. Our environmental culture is respected throughout the country, Governor Jim Douglas and the Legislature are advocates for the environment, good ideas that create national policy usually come from the states, and, most important, Vermonters have the will to discuss and embrace new ideas to improve the environment.

In closing, I would like to applaud The Central Vermont Solid Waste District for setting the bar high at zero waste reductions, and I believe the today's forum, **Beyond Disposal: Preventing Waste in Vermont**, will begin a new paradigm in managing waste, and will ultimately be the long-term ticket in reducing our waste stream. I'm not so naïve as to think that this will become a reality tomorrow, but we would never have gone to the moon without a vision and the tenacity to make it happen. The more we hold conferences like today's and learn from others, the closer we will get to reaching the bar.

I want to applaud the efforts and work that has been done by the Vermont Legislature, our solid waste division, Solid Waste Districts, solid waste professionals, environmental groups, and citizens that have worked tirelessly to improve solid waste practices in Vermont. Without your efforts, we would not be in a position to begin planning and developing the next generation of waste management. I also want to recognize the Chittenden Solid Waste District for winning one of the Governor's Environmental Awards for the work that you did in creating your MERF. Tom Morrow, its executive director, and I spent endless nights back in our Burlington days crafting a hazardous waste drop-off center, apartment recycling, and a green business program.

In closing, I want you to know that the Agency of Natural Resources will be your partner. Yes, we have an obligation to set the bar high, write permits and carry out compliance and enforcement as required. But I believe our greatest contribution in the future will be to partner with all of you. We must listen well, respect your thoughts, and most importantly become part of the solution in creating the next generation of solid waste alternatives.

And I say, let it begin today.

Thank you.