

# Holding to a Steady Course November – December 2010

By William M. Merry

The year was 1983, Microsoft had just released its first word processor for IBM, PCs running DOS, and curbside recycling was in its infancy. I was in the first decade of my career in the solid waste industry, and the landfill had 40 years of projected capacity remaining.

Much has changed since then. Recycling programs have become mainstream and in some cases “mandatory,” the characterization of the wastestream has changed, and I have grown older. Our local landfill, while occupying the same footprint it did then, has over 150 years of future capacity. What happened? Where did this additional landfill capacity come from? Does zero waste mean we replace our trashcan with a recycling bin, and what can be learned from all of this?

First of all, I live and work in California. Unlike Las Vegas, not all of what happens in California stays in California. Recycling, for example, has spread from coast to coast and is widely embraced. Locally, our recycling programs extend from single-family households, to multifamily buildings, and commercial businesses. One of the hottest legislative debates in the last session concerned a proposal (since defeated) to ban the retail distribution of plastic bags.

Some of our local efforts didn't pan out, such as separating curbside materials at the truck and hosting one-day household hazardous waste (HHW) collection events. Processing and separation now take place at material recovery facilities, and we built a permanent facility to receive daily HHW turn-ins, but we learned from those experiences.

Communities across California are now bracing for the implementation of “mandatory” multifamily and commercial recycling programs. This is a result of the California Air Resources Board Scoping Plan for the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 5 million tons of carbon-dioxide equivalents. Additionally, while local diversion levels are over 60%, as measured by AB 939 and SB 1016, AB 737 is now on the Governor's desk awaiting consideration. This bill would raise the bar on mandatory diversion to 75% by 2020.

The decision many communities will be facing is when and how to implement programs to increase diversion, and what kind of diversion program comes next? We would be well served to look at our own local history to aid in making these decisions.

For example, one of the first LFGTE plants in the US was developed and put on-line at our landfill in 1983. While it was only a 1.3-megawatt plant back then, it has grown over time to 5 megawatts and today supplies all our electrical needs while generating 15% of district revenues.

Today, the community is looking to our district to deliver additional renewable energy to a proposed water desalination plant to be located adjacent to district property. Thirty years ago we never imagined this. Yet by taking incremental steps to grow our LFG project steadily and cost effectively, the once “pilot” project has taken center stage in regional water supply discussions.

We learn the same lesson by looking at the growth of our Last Chance Mercantile reuse store. Our board made a decision to “study the feasibility of recycling or salvaging useful materials from solid waste” in 1971. In the late 1980s, salvaging materials for reuse was promoted through quarterly auctions. Quarterly auctions became monthly and then weekly sales events. In 1991, a permanent Last Chance Mercantile reuse

store was opened in an old machine shed onsite. By 1994, we were ready to move into a new 8,000-square-foot building, open six days a week, and the customers still keep coming.

Judging from the feedback of our 1,100 Facebook fans and local awards, the Last Chance Mercantile is now a revered institution in our local community. The store provides 10 full-time jobs and more than 67,000 annual sales transactions. Sales totaled \$789,000 in 2009 and have grown steadily in each of the last 10 years. That's all in addition to the thousands of tons of reusable goods the store has diverted from landfill disposal.

Today, the EPA reports that reuse programs are the best way to lower our consumption-inflated carbon footprints. The Last Chance Mercantile has been successful because we allowed it to grow slowly, year by year. It's safe to say that "carbon footprints" were not on our radar in the 1980s when we first sold reusable goods.

As we ponder the future of our local initiatives, these two programs are good examples. When considering new diversion programs, we will be looking at local job creation and opportunities to process materials locally instead of shipping to distant markets. The need to conduct our business more regionally and sustainably is an important part of this process. The state of California has a zero-waste goal, as do many local communities. Tonnages to our landfill have decreased 30% over the last five years with a corresponding reduction in revenue. Vacant staff positions left unfilled, and capital and maintenance expenses deferred are an unsustainable pathway.

Our district is doing the same thing many other California communities are doing. We're going through our budget with a fine-tooth comb and questioning the long-term viability of our "old" financial model. We recognize that "sustainability" encompasses both environmental and economic goals.

At Wastecon's annual conference in Boston I listened to several informative presentations on waste processing, development of renewable energy and conversion technology projects. Many of the ideas sound appealing. However, our experience suggests that we learn from our nearly 60-year history.

A technology used in Europe or Japan, or imposed on another type of feedstock, may not be transferable locally. Walt Niessan, P.E., the Lawrence Lecturer at Wastecon, speaking on the topic of emerging technologies cautioned, "do your homework, check dates and facts, and if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Good advice for all of us. As we plan for the future, our bottom line includes doing what makes sense in our community.

It is clear to those of us living in California that more recycling and higher diversion mandates are on the horizon. Waste reduction and reuse continue to carry more weight in the recycling hierarchy just as when the "3R" phrase was first coined.

And where did all of our landfill capacity that I referred to at the beginning of this story come from? It came from prudent development of the potential resource over the years, and from local successes in waste reduction and recycling.

Finally, as I continue to grow older (and I know my crystal ball is probably not much better than yours) I have no doubt that landfilling material locally will not be the preferred option 150 years from now. MSW

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