

Recycling of Residential Waste

One major environmental issue and related programs that started to bubble up from the bottom was recycling. Up until the mid-1980's, almost all trash was collected and then dumped in landfills. At the time, I was the town administrator in a community of 25,000 in the Midwest. We invited people in the community to share their ideas about what the town government should be emphasizing in the coming five years. Concerns and suggestions about maintaining and improving roads, water and sewer utilities, and police and fire services were of interest to most of the people.

But one of the most frequently mentioned ideas was that the town should start a recycling program. Hardly anything was being done on a local, state, or national level to promote residential recycling as a positive environmental program. As we looked into what it would take to start a recycling program, we found that it would be expensive to make such a transition. The biggest initial cost would be to finance a second fleet of trucks to collect recyclable material. And, at that time, there were very few recycling centers large enough in scale to handle truckloads of recyclable materials.

But as we studied that issue, we did find something which we could implement fairly easily and inexpensively. That was to recycle yard waste: grass, leaves, branches, etc. The town owned some vacant land in a more rural area of the community. We decided to create a yard waste recycling program on that property. We were not in a position to collect the yard waste, but we invited residents to bring their yard waste to this site. We then used some of our frontend loaders to turn and mix the yard waste to create compost and mulch which people could then come and get that material to use in their own landscaping and gardens.

In 1991, I became city manager in a suburb of Chicago. Residential recycling was just starting. The original program was paper products. But after a few years, people in our community and about 20 other neighboring communities got together to develop and implement a broader recycling program which also included plastic and metal. We worked with and developed a couple of regional recycling centers. People in our communities were fully behind this program. After about a year and a half of implementing the recycling program, we found that the recycling collections on a tonnage basis had become greater than the garbage and trash which was collected and sent to a landfill.



I tell this story because just as many new ideas come from individuals and small groups, my experience of working with over 300 city and county governments across the country is that

these local governments, which are closest to their citizens and interact with them on a daily basis were and have been a source of hope and change from the bottom up.