

Flashback on the road to Zero Waste

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It's been more than 20 years since "recycle or die" became the slogan of the recycling movement. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Some ideas are stored in a seedbed of wisdom, ready to germinate when we need them to survive.

The motto "recycle or die" surfaced in 1987 when several other activists and I chanced upon a custom button shop between Austin's convention centre and the 6th Street bars. Three arrows circling those words affirmed our mission. We carried our shields back to a large recycling conference and gave them out to waste-not crusaders from cities across North America.

I was 24, half the age I am now. I had driven cross-country to get to the gathering. It was our turn to turn the world around.

Memories of that time return as I watch Vancouver, Seattle and Portland advance our region's conservation ethic. All three cities embrace aggressive waste-reduction goals (80 per cent by 2020 for Vancouver, 75 per cent by 2015 for Portland, and 60 per cent by 2012 for Seattle). Vancouver intends to become the greenest city on earth, the first to hit the zero-waste bull's eye.

Of these urban areas, Vancouver is uniquely challenged in this race to be the world's environmental model. The city incinerates part of its waste stream, whereas Portland and Seattle do not. In fact, Metro Vancouver is considering whether to burn more garbage.

I have some experience with waste prevention and incinerators. Hope for our region and planet prompted this retrospective column.

Dawn of a movement

Sometimes it helps to look back in order to project forward. 1987 was a turning point for recycling. The stage was set when a tugboat named the Break of Dawn pulled out of New York harbour towing a barge loaded with solid waste. The vessel was headed for North Carolina, where its cargo was slated for burial in a landfill.

A problem arose when state officials asked if the shipment contained anything toxic. The response of "probably not" didn't suffice. Over the next six months, the so called "garbage barge" became a media sensation, journeying as far south as Belize in search of a port that would accept its trash. After repeated denials, it returned home.

News of the fool's errand exposed looming problems with waste, in terms of volume and toxicity. The barge was a broadcast symbol of business as usual, a harbinger of our need for reforms. Broadened public awareness energized recyclers across the continent. It certainly added to the revelry at the Austin recycling conference, where, during the banquet, a beautiful blonde recycling coordinator from California acted out a skit about the barge with environmentalist folksinger Bill Oliver.

Some weeks after the conference, the barge's cargo was burned at a Brooklyn incinerator. The symbol of our waste problems went up in smoke, and the remaining ash was quietly buried in a Long Island landfill.

This burnt end to a wasted trip warned of future pitfalls.

Remains of the glory days

The significance of the garbage barge was commemorated in an [article](#) in *Waste Age* magazine by Chaz Miller, senior staff with the National Solid Waste Management Association.

"After the circus was over, the barge had a profound impact on solid waste and recycling. Within three years, most states passed laws requiring some kind of municipal recycling. The United States went from about 600 cities with curbside recycling programs to almost 10,000. Our recycling rate is three times higher now than it was in 1987."

"And yet, in spite of all of these laws and programs, we still haven't solved the fundamental problem of recycling. We know how to collect recyclables from single-family housing. We know how to process recyclables for end markets. But we haven't solved the value problem."

What this means is that for most communities, the value of recyclables is less than the cost of collecting and processing them. In my view, this is because society doesn't account for the full cradle-to-grave costs of using raw materials in consumer products -- many of which are single-use, short-lived and difficult to reuse or recycle.

We change this accounting by manufacturing products and packaging that don't add to the waste stream. Called "extended producer responsibility" or "product stewardship," this strategy requires those who make, sell and purchase products to support the costs and management functions associated with reusing, recycling or composting them. Often, this is done through a product surcharge that pays for these costs and functions.

A huge boost in public support is necessary to make this happen. Such energy dissipates when leaders implement practices that serve as cover for the status quo. Incineration is a key example of an out-of-sight-out-of-mind practice that provides that kind of cover.

Solving the value problem requires that we revive and exceed the shared passion for waste prevention that motivated us in the wake of the garbage barge. It was exciting to assert our recycle-or-die convictions in business, government and not-for-profit activism.

The third sector was my entry to the party. I joined the staff of an environmental group, organized recycling conferences, founded a state recycling organization, was elected to the board of the National Recycling Coalition, fought a garbage-burning dragon and married the beautiful blond recycling coordinator from California.

Apple pie and activism

Jennifer and I no longer work in the professional recycling field, unless one counts our second-hand bookshop in Cannon Beach, Ore. Yet we seek to close the loop on our farm, and are blessed to live near a not-for-profit recycling centre that champions zero waste in our community.

The movement has moved on, thanks to good people. And as Chaz Miller points out, the challenge remains the same.

Soon after I joined the board of the National Recycling Coalition, Chaz visited me in Nashville, where I was living at the time. We ate apple pie at Elliston Place Soda Shop and discussed our respective roles with recycling – him working on the business side, I employed with the Tennessee Environmental Council. In the spirit of cross-sector teamwork, my fellow NRC board member offered some seasoned advice.

“Your job,” Chaz said, “is to push people further than we want to go.”

At the time I thought it was a unique thing for someone in the private sector to say. Yet over the years, I’ve learned that certain waste-related industries are allied with environmentalists on the push for recycling. Others, not so much. And those who were most resistant to change, at least in Tennessee, were not businessmen but lobbyists for some local governments.

This mix of perspectives may be familiar to citizens of British Columbia. The City of Vancouver embraces a very progressive plan to manage waste. Same goes for the Greater Vancouver Regional District, headquartered in adjacent Burnaby. Nevertheless, this joint planning effort is now yoked to the option of more incineration. The area’s current garbage burner is also located in Burnaby, and a new one is being proposed in various possible locations (Vancouver Island, for example).

In essence, a small majority of municipal officials on Metro Vancouver’s board [overrode the concerns of progressive members](#) on a key solid waste decision. The same conflict occupied our time and attention in Nashville, where metro officials were seeking to expand the city’s mass burn incinerator.

The dynamics involved in such intra-urban politics are very old. In days of yore, they were viewed in a mythological context.

After eating our pie, Chaz wanted to check out a popular tourist attraction located close to the soda shop -- a full-scale replica of the Parthenon that once stood in Athens, cradle city of Western civilization. At the center of the structure is a 42-foot statue of Athena, goddess of political intellect, domestic industry and strategic warfare.

Athena rocked the cradle of mankind's metropolitan development, and she's as good a symbol as any for the activation of wisdom in municipal life. She can be the mother of urban planning, or the queen of the status quo, depending on the will of her well-connected patrons.

It's a bitch trying to persuade that bunch to move forward when they dig in their heels. But the job must be done.

Choices

There are two ways to manage solid waste -- prevent it or dispose of it. We prevent waste through source reduction, reuse, recycling and composting. We dispose of it with landfills and incinerators.

The word "recovery" is used to describe the generation of energy from waste -- mostly through methane produced in landfills or by using garbage as fuel for incinerators. These are not forms of waste prevention, but rather methods of retrieving some secondary benefit from disposal. If energy recovery from disposal is included in planning, it should not be counted toward the zero-waste goal.

Part of the appeal of incineration is that the resulting ash takes up less space in landfills. Yet there are two technical downsides -- burning garbage pollutes the air, and it competes with waste prevention by using some recyclables as combustible fuel.

Landfills carry risks as well. The key difference between landfills and incinerators is that the former are functionally compatible with recycling. In fact some of the biggest companies in the landfill business are also the largest providers of recycling services. This may afford them an enlightened self-interest in shifting from an economy dependent on disposal to one based on prevention.

It's disheartening to see Vancouver's leadership in that new economy hampered by the same battle over burning we faced 20 years ago. The city's aim of environmental

excellence is undercut by this regressive conflict between waste prevention and waste-to-fuel.

Race for the earth

Decisions on incineration often hinge on air quality. When mixed municipal waste is burned, it is very costly to scrub what comes out of the stacks. Such expenditures divert resources from prevention, and usually fail to allay civic concerns about pollution from burning garbage.

In the end, it didn't make political or economic sense to expand the incinerator in Nashville, and ultimately the facility was shut down. Vancouver is light years beyond where we were down South in terms of environmental activism. Will leaders capitalize on fresh new initiative, or divide and divert public energy in the same old way?

The disposable age is ending, by well-planned choice or by collapse of a wastrel empire. The first city to hit zero waste will become the new earth-friendly Athens, flagship for the greening of civilization.

If not Vancouver, perhaps Portland or Seattle?

Welcome to the metropolitan Olympics, where we exalt the wisdom to save our planet. May Mother Nature win, for us all.