

Model Municipal Recycling Program: The Lancaster City Story

By Tim Breneisen, Manager, Solid Waste & Recycling Program, City of Lancaster

When Act 101 was enacted in 1988, trash services in Lancaster County were predominantly subscription-based. There were a handful of subsidized curbside recycling programs serviced by a non-profit whose primary mission was job training. With a new recycling mandate for thousands of households, this model was unsustainable.

Range of Haulers

Lancaster City was not among those municipalities that had a recycling program when Act 101 mandates unfolded. Fortunately, the county solid waste authority provided leadership, a planning process and the necessary implementation documents. Although one collection program option was to use a single-hauler contract to establish a comprehensive solid waste and recycling program where residents could benefit financially from waste reduction due to aggressive recycling participation, the city opted to implement a program that relied on the two dozen independent haulers that were already collecting trash from its 55,000 residents. They required these hauling companies, which ranged in size from large national companies to small owner-operators of plywood-sided half-ton pick-up trucks, to provide recycling collection services.

Some haulers found the challenge too great and either went out of business, sold out to a larger hauler, or continued operation with less than satisfactory results. Although the belief that "free enterprise" and a "choice" of hauler would keep prices low through competition, the opposite occurred. Collection inefficiencies more than offset any savings from recycling. In fact, hauler records revealed that during one

evaluation, eight different haulers provided services on just one city block. Additionally, even with the city's close proximity to the Transfer Station, consumer costs for trash and recycling services were among the highest in the county, while the amount of recyclables diverted per capita was among the lowest in the county.

Compounding the problem was the administrative challenge to track and ensure each household had hauler service, despite the requirement for "licensed"

haulers to report their customer base annually. Residents routinely switched haulers and a significant number of property owners chose not to have any weekly collection of waste, let alone recycle. It is estimated that at one point about 5,000 of the 18,000 residential units in the city lacked weekly collection services. Illegal dumping and storage of trash in garages and basements was rampant.

Free Collection

During this time, Lancaster underwrote a "free collection" in an attempt to clean up the city of those "hard to dispose of items" like tires, large furniture and appliances. This program, subsidized from the general fund, turned into likely the largest city-sanctioned open dumping event in Lancaster's history. Residents literally hauled mountains of household trash to the curb. By the time city workers cleaned a block and moved on, more came out. This showed personal responsibility at its worst.

At Long Last, Effective Collection

Finally, in 2006, after enough years of ineffectual solid waste management and 16 years after first being considered, the city established a contract collection program. The city bid for collection services only. With 17,000 households to be picked up, only a few of the current haulers had the resources to handle this type of program. The city administers the contract and invoices residents. A key aspect is that the city pays the disposal costs for the municipal waste that is collected. By accepting the risk, residents benefit directly from waste reduction with recycling efforts, since the current \$210 annual program cost is based in part on the disposal costs paid by the city. The program includes curbside collection of glass, metal and plastic containers and newsprint.

To establish the habit of weekly disposal and break the cycle of illegal dumping, the city program allows each residential unit to set out up to six (6) 30 gallon/30 pound containers of waste each week. Although this allowance is nearly four times the average amount of waste set out by households in the county, the goal is to ensure that residents can dispose of all the waste and discourage poor disposal practices of the past. This has been successful. Even littering has decreased, as verified by the annual four-year reduction in our street side litter index as determined from windshield surveys.

Although, due to pre-existing contracts, there are still about 2,000 households using independent haulers, the extent of illegal dumping has decreased dramatically, recycling is increasing and overall cleanliness has improved.

In the past twenty years, the city has moved from a program overseen by one person that relied on the existing hauling com-

munity to implement the program to an organized, efficient single-hauler collection model that is managed by a staff of four, which includes an aggressive enforcement feature. Recycling and solid waste management in Lancaster City has progressed tremendously in the past 20 years through trial and error, grant funding and a desire to correct problems and strive for efficiency.

Down the Road

So where do we go from here? The program is not entirely in place yet. Although the city has yard waste collection to complement annual leaf collection, an expanded collection frequency for organics will make the program more user-friendly. In 2010, the city added a white goods collection program. In late 2010, through a recent 902 grant award, the city is developing a drop-off program where residents and small businesses can recycle fiber that is not collected at curbside, including residential mixed paper and corrugated cardboard. Adding these materials will enable residents to recycle more, which will reduce the amount of waste needing disposed. The city will continue to grow and develop its program as opportunities become available.



J. Reigh photo

Tim Breneisen at Ag Progress Days in August 2006.

Tim Breneisen is the Manager of the Solid Waste and Recycling Program with the City of Lancaster. He previously served as the Recycling Coordinator for Lancaster County and spent time with the PA Recycling Markets Center.



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