

MythBusters: Illegal dumping and open burning are necessary features of rural living.
By Art Feltes, PROP President

As I was driving over the many rivers and through the many woods to Granma’s house for Thanksgiving, I was met with the smell of roasting turkey, baking pies, and the acrid odor of burning leaves. Don’t get me wrong, on some level that strong smell brings back childhood memories of the very season I am celebrating. In fact, I often recall an executive with a county waste authority wistfully describing his father and grandfather debating the issues of the day over a beer while stoking the burn barrel.

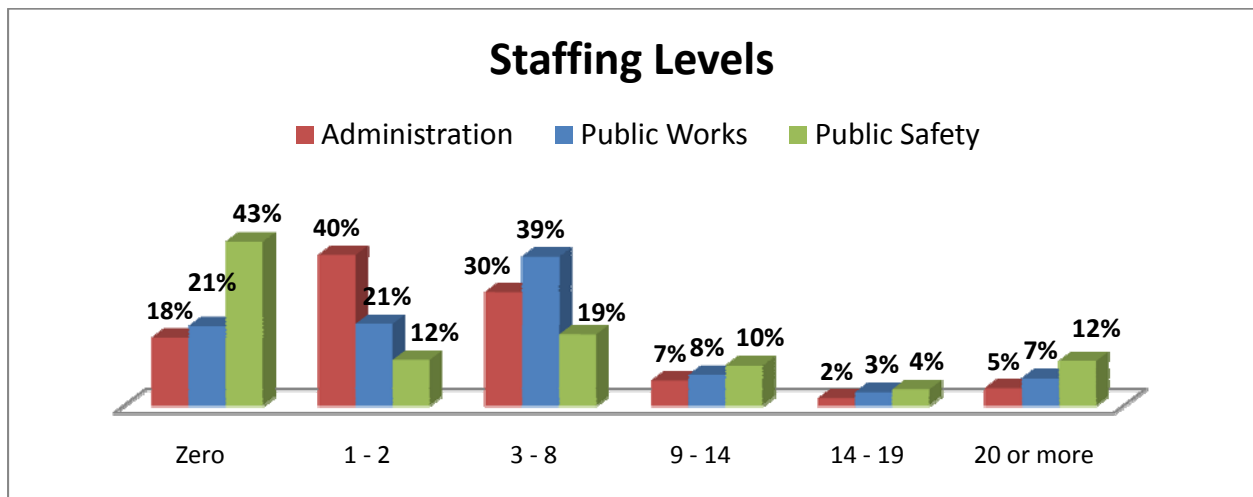
Perhaps colonists in the eighteenth century had the same fond memories of dumping their waste in the streets of Philadelphia or burying it in their backyards. Now such activities are the stuff of clandestine moonless crossings to the dark and seamy side of the tracks: in some cases, literally.

However, now that I know that a single household burn barrel may release as many toxic chemical agents into the air as a large municipal incinerator, and that the smoke contains at least seven known cancer-causing compounds including one believed to be a major factor in lung cancer, I am less likely to dwell on a romanticized vision of the past. This Myth has been busted right now and here’s why!

While the miles tick away and one rolling hill gives way to a clearing of deer just yards away from a stone farmhouse, I think back to the PA Forest Lands Beautification Project in 2001 and the (United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) “Enhancing Waste Services: Improving Quality of Life” study that I helped wrap up this year. For all the renewed focus on the environment, greenhouse gasses, and recycling, strangely not much has changed. And worse, although most of the results of those surveys are commonsense conclusions, very little has been done to improve the overall landscape.

Fragmented government is a significant contributor to a general inability for many local government units to be able to adequately address solid waste, recycling and other related quality of life issues. In the USDA study this point becomes painfully clear. The survey interviewed almost 700 of the 2,600 Pennsylvania municipalities on a variety of quality of life issues including waste, recycling and open burning. The surveys did substantiate and quantify many relationships between waste management practices and illegal dumping and other improper disposal habits. The findings are extensive and additional findings may be identified with further analysis. These findings are valuable in understanding why people dump throughout the Commonwealth.

It is striking how many of the municipalities rely entirely on one or two part-time people to run all aspects of governance. True, they tend to be more rural municipalities with smaller populations, but that shouldn’t be the determining factor as to whether a Pennsylvania citizen has adequate access to basic services (including waste, water, road and recreation).



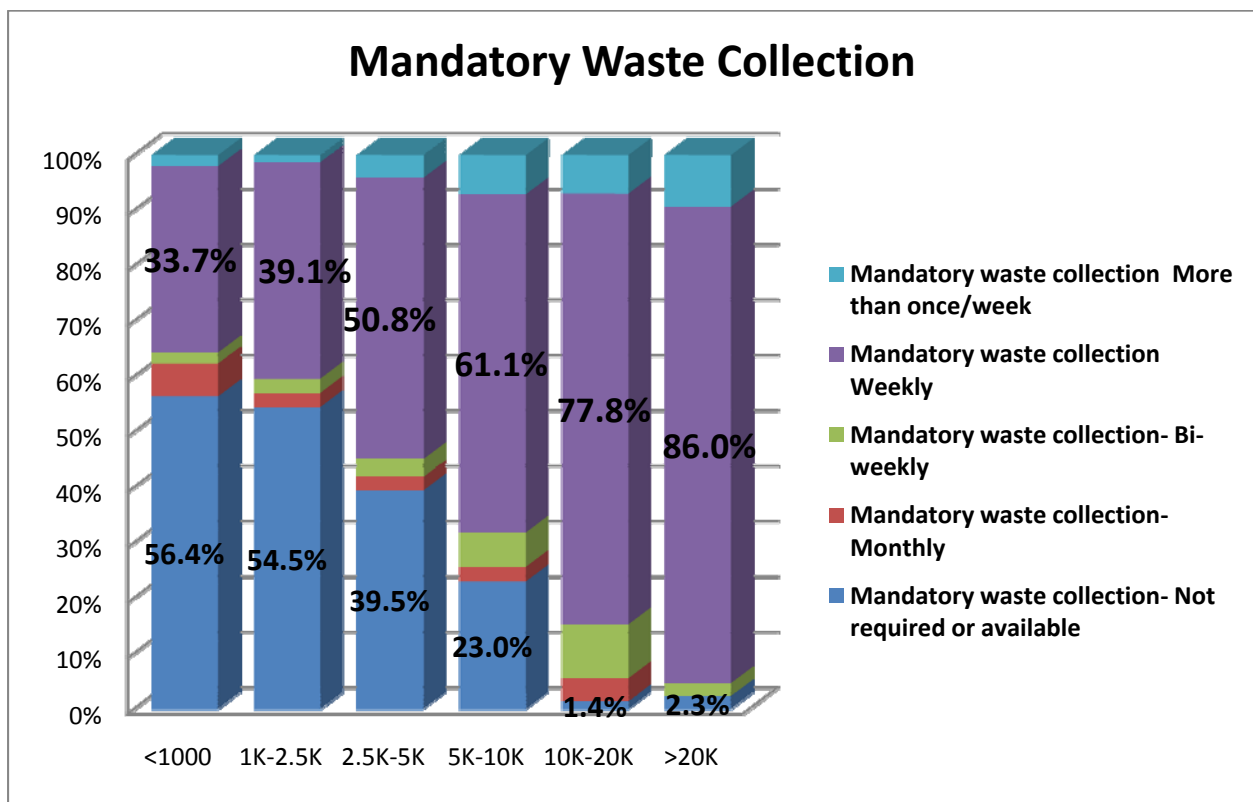
Being a bit of a statistics geek, let me point out some of the survey results that I found interesting regarding this point. Over 75 percent of municipalities rely on volunteer fire companies for fire protection. Although 80 percent of municipalities felt that road maintenance was their primary responsibility, over half of those had less than two Public Works employees. Only when you had a municipal population of over 10,000 did you have a chance to have

a full time Fire Chief, Code Enforcement Officer, Waste/Recycling Coordinator, Planning Director, Building Inspector, or Park and Recreation Director.

In the USDA Quality of Life Self-Assessment, there were some issues that were universally recognized by municipalities as problems. The vibrancy of downtown, the conditions of streets, adequate pedestrian access and sufficient bike/trail routes were the community assets, that from the smallest to the largest municipalities, were found wanting. There was agreement that public litter, private property trash accumulation and blight were community liabilities not addressed sufficiently in all communities. Storm water management and public transportation were community services that were subpar regardless of the size of the community.

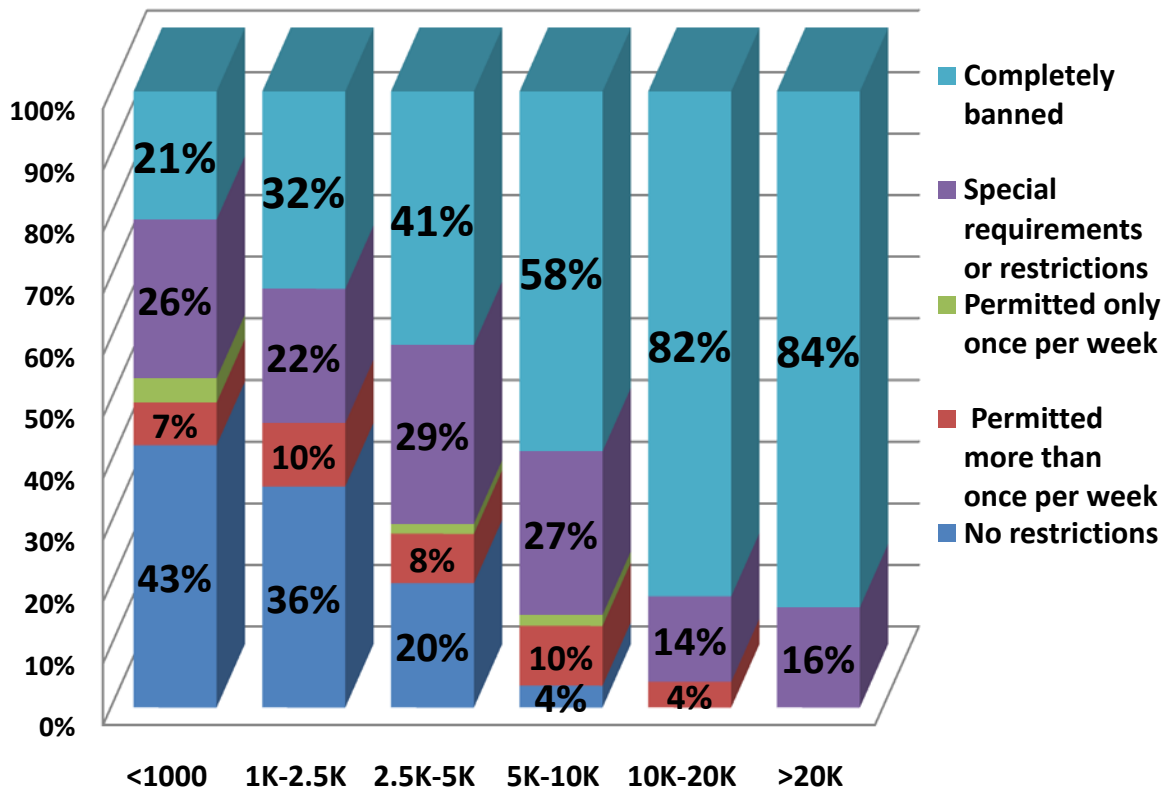
Not surprisingly, the larger the municipality the greater the problem with suburban sprawl, traffic congestion or drug activity. The smaller the community, the greater the problem meeting community service needs including water, waste, recycling, leaf waste, storm water and public transportation.

Interestingly enough, there was a direct correlation between litter and open burning problems in a community, and the presence of mandatory waste collection. In other words, if a municipality required residents to have waste services, they were significantly less likely to have burning or dumping problems in their community.



Similarly, regardless of size, when a municipality takes a comprehensive approach and makes a thorough commitment, their odds of success are greatly enhanced. Whether urban or rural, small or large, there are several waste collection services that make a significant difference in decreasing dumping and burning. These include curbside recycling programs, mandatory waste collection ordinances, bulky waste collection programs and single hauler (contracted or municipal) collection systems.

Open Burning of Trash



Illegal dumping and burning are complex problems. To fully understand them, PROP and the USDA looked not only at illegal dumping but also other indicators of waste disposal and quality of life problems including household waste accumulation, bulky waste accumulation, households without waste collection service, inconvenient and distant recycling and disposal facilities and types of hauling systems.

When presented with convenient and affordable options, a very large portion of the public will handle their waste and recyclable material properly.

Smaller, rural, financially challenged municipalities are confronted with a great many obstacles in establishing solid waste management programs that address the needs of their communities. Even larger, urban communities can experience dumping problems if their collection systems aren't convenient or exclude certain items from collection. Several communities have had success reducing dumping by simply compiling lists of places that take hard-to-recycle items.

The survey research confirms the complexity and widespread nature of the illegal dumping problem. It also shows that no one entity typically solves the problem by itself. It will take the efforts of several state agencies, both local and county government, non-profit organizations, and a broad base of public citizens.

Municipal officials tend to wear many hats and solid waste problems are just one of many difficult issues confronting them. County staff is also more likely to see the big picture issues and the inter-municipal connections that often elude municipal officials. Many rural communities experience illegal dumping that originates in nearby communities rather than their own. Yet the community contributing the waste frequently experiences little illegal dumping itself because of land use patterns, population density, or fewer remote areas that would facilitate low risk dumping.

(BREAKOUT BOX: "Recommendations from the Quality of Life Survey")

- **Illegal dumping is less of a problem in municipalities that are actively involved in the residential waste and recycling removal system. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of municipalities that contract or provide municipal waste service have significantly fewer illegal dump problems.**
- **Trash accumulation is also less of a problem in municipalities which do not make it the residents' responsibility to take care of waste removal. Communities with Curbside Recycling reported a 6.4 percent decrease in illegal dumping compared to the overall communities in the survey.**
- **Illegal dumping is gaining awareness in communities. The number of communities with one or more known dumps has increased over 6 percent since 2001. This increasing awareness of the number of dumps might help to increase the amount of action taken to reduce them.**
- **Inconvenient Recycling Facilities create more illegal dumps. If residents cannot access recycling services, the amount of waste accumulation increased by over 10 percent.**
- **Access to waste haulers affects the number of illegal dumps. In communities with one or more illegal dumps, they are 12 percent less likely to have a waste hauler available. More waste haulers would help communities correctly dispose of their waste and reduce the number of illegal dumps.**

Local Government Recommendations from the 2009 Survey

Beyond the recommendations made in the original report in 2001, our USDA follow-up survey yielded these further suggestions and reinforcement of initial recommendations:

- **Strengthen the link between small local governments and county officials. County government officials play an important role in the functioning of smaller government. By promoting a stronger relationship between them, each group can reach a better understanding of the other's goals and methods.**
- **Direction from the county down to local government administrators would improve organization and uniformity among townships and municipalities similar in nature.**
- **Encourage local governments in close proximity to each other to work together to achieve common goals. Often, the same problems can become a burden for neighboring municipalities. Because issues that affect one municipality often affect others in close proximity, helping them work together would give them strength in numbers.**
- **Make municipal government administrator lists widely available. It is extremely difficult to educate and build partnerships among local governments when it is so difficult to even contact them. These resources are better than they were even a few years ago but are still difficult to access.**

With the trip to Granma's over, I am struck with the empty feeling that the slow, sometimes imperceptible progress in waste reduction and recycling will always be stuck in a quagmire of inaction and a lack of funding. Sadly it will be the people living in the most pristine parts of Pennsylvania that will bear the biggest burdens of asthma-causing smoke clouds, rusting washers and rotting tires, all the while having to look at their childrens' jubilant faces describe the good things that can come of recycling, energy conservation, water preservation and other initiatives. Their sad response, as the smoke rises from the barrel, or the tire rolls into the gully; "We don't do that here." Tragic.

We have the simple answers to illegal dumping and open burning. It's a simple matter of implementing them. Well.....maybe that's the myth.

Art Feltes is a graduate from the George Washington University with a minor in Statistics. He is the President of the PROP Board of Directors and the chair of PROP's strategic planning committee. Art prefers quantitative data to words any day. Examining the 560,000 cell USDA sponsored spreadsheet data has been particularly fascinating. In it are facts about waste, illegal dumping and open burning in Pennsylvania that

have not been discussed in this level of detail before this survey. Hopefully you will take away from this a perspective that will help you address your not-so-unique waste problems.