

# Pennsylvania's Recycling Strategic Planning Task Force Report

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Compiled by the



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**Recycling Strategic Planning Task Force  
Draft Report**

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## 1. Overview

The Professional Recyclers of Pennsylvania (PROP) and its 350 members represent more than a thousand curbside and drop-off recycling programs and recycling businesses throughout the Commonwealth and nearby states. One of the organization's goals is to help plan for the long-term stability and sustainability of recycling, composting, and waste reduction in the Pennsylvania. In response to this goal, PROP established a Recycling Strategic Planning Task Force to discuss pertinent issues and sketch a plan for the future of recycling in the Commonwealth.

The Task Force met during May, June, and July of 2000, April 2001, and again in March of 2002. Invitees included representatives from the public and private sector, from rural and urban parts of the state, and each of the municipal government associations. The Pennsylvania Environmental Council and the Pennsylvania Municipal Authorities Association facilitated the initial meetings.

It was the goal of the Task Force to sketch a preliminary plan for recycling in Pennsylvania, with particular emphasis beyond 2004 when state funding authorization sunsets. There was consensus that recycling was still viewed favorably by decision makers but that it had fallen from the political "radar screen" of high priority issues. It was concluded that anything undertaken by the Task Force should keep this in mind and that the value and importance of recycling had to be persistently stressed.

The group participated in a facilitated discussion to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to recycling. Through these discussions, the Task Force would ultimately try to draft a strategy to build on the strengths, address the weaknesses, and take advantage of the opportunities.

## 2. The Task Force

The Task Force consisted of both public and private sector recycling professionals, urban and rural parts of the state, and representatives of the local government and municipal authority associations.

- Tom Boushel - Vquip, Inc.
- Wayne Bowen - Schuylkill County
- Tim Breneisen - Lancaster County
- John Brosious - PA Municipal Authorities Association
- Robert Cogle - Cogle's Recycling, Inc.
- Dean DeLong - Monroe County
- Thomas Embich - PA Composting Association
- John Frederick - Professional Recyclers of PA
- Joyce Hatala - Lackawanna County
- Douglas Hill - County Commissioner's Association of PA
- Holly Hood - PA State Association of Townships
- W. Edward Latinski - Luzerne County
- Carol Mas - Town of Bloomsburg
- Jodi McCluskey - Clearfield County
- Tanya McCoy-Caretti - Cambria County
- Charles Raudenbush - Waste Management of PA
- Joanne Shafer - Centre County
- Ed Troxell - Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs

## 3. Pennsylvania's Recycling Program

### 3.1 Strengths

The group identified a number of strengths and discussed them during their initial meeting. The existing **recycling legislation** (Act 101 of 1988) was seen as Pennsylvania's greatest asset. Act 101 not only provided the impetus to recycle, but also provided the capital funding and public education resources that built the sound foundation for the program. Among other things, the legislation has:

- Mandated or encouraged a large number of local programs
- Facilitated extensive public access to recycling
- Enhanced Pennsylvania's recycling infrastructure
- Help generate state-level support far superior to most states
- Provided a stable source of funding

The **economic benefits** brought to the state have been significant, through job creation and retention, new and expanded businesses, and spin-off economic activity. Recent studies by both the Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) and the National Recycling Coalition have documented and detailed those benefits. In Pennsylvania alone, NERC's study counted more than:

- 3,000 recycling businesses
- 81,000 people employed in the recycling industry
- \$2.9 billion in payroll
- \$18.4 billion in annual sales
- \$305 million in tax receipts

The establishment and enhancement of recycling and solid waste services have also **encouraged partnerships** between counties, municipalities, and state government. Many of these partnerships have also included extensive support from private sector businesses. It is clear that this collaboration has helped provide better services for less money while improving and expanding environmentally beneficial programs.

There has been **strong public support for the recycling program** since passage of the enabling legislation in 1988. This public support has not only helped the Commonwealth meet its initial waste diversion goal of 25% but has also been responsible for widespread composting and uncommonly high rural recycling rates in non-mandated communities. A special community or corporate pride in a recycling program further reinforces exceptional efforts. Strong support from business and industry has brought noteworthy pollution prevention and waste reduction endeavors.

Pennsylvania's recycling efforts have also **fostered a renewed environmental ethic** among both the general citizenry and the business community. People feel like they are part of the solution and that recycling helps address a problem to which they have contributed. The affect on the state's youth was felt to be particularly profound. Beyond the recycling benefits, additional programs and changes brought about by Act 101 have raised awareness of illegal dumping, open burning, and the importance of solid waste enforcement.

### 3.2 *Weaknesses and Threats*

Though Pennsylvania's recycling program had many strengths, a number of weaknesses were also discussed. The greatest concern was the **uncertainty of state funding beyond 2004**. Funding for the Act 101 grant programs was initially authorized for ten years in 1988. Through two different legislative actions, the funding was renewed through Autumn 2004. Though the sunset date may seem far off, it is only one collection contract renewal away for most program administrators. If fundamental changes are to take place, it is important for recycling coordinators and program managers to begin planning now.

Despite the many positive economic impacts of recycling, the program still **lacks long-term sustainability**. In the short term, disposal remains financially attractive, though environmentally shortsighted. But sustaining the financial support for recycling will continue to pay great dividends. The Task Force saw recycling and composting as worthwhile alternatives that saved energy, reused resources, lessened the impacts of extractive activities, and generated value-adding economic activity that disposal could never equal.

Perhaps because of its own success, **recycling has lost the political stature** that it enjoyed during the days of garbage barges and high landfill costs. Though not at all unpopular, recycling has fallen from the political radar screen. Recycling's relative success has changed the political perception of the solid waste issue. In the absence of a crisis, the issue seems less important. In a similar way, public apathy has grown as landfill and disposal concerns have lessened.

Though the legislation was and remains fundamentally sound, some of the **bureaucratic, procedural, and legislative requirements have been unexpectedly cumbersome**. Though the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) staff has made significant progress in overcoming many of these obstacles and delays, some of

the procedures remain cumbersome and funding processes remain slow. Even with improvements, funding rounds are inconsistent and unpredictable.

The Task Force perceived a **lack of long-term planning and a vision for the future** of recycling and waste management in the Commonwealth. County waste management plans, DEP regional recycling staff, and the state Solid Waste Advisory and Recycling Fund Advisory Committees all consider some aspect of recycling and waste management. The group was encouraged by the state's recently initiated statewide strategic planning process.

Virgin material **subsidies are not recognized nor the economics of recycling well understood**. Recycling economics are complex and subsidies are politically complicated. Recycling often finds itself at an economic disadvantage because of subsidies and long-entrenched attitudes, practices, and policies.

Though the Task Force did not examine **market issues** in great detail (since a state funded Market Center was on the horizon), it was inevitable that the subject would arise. The group saw these issues to be the greatest concerns:

- Some recycling markets have deteriorated (like green glass).
- Others have fluctuated wildly (like cardboard).
- Geography and transportation struggles decrease market options and prices of commodities.
- The lack of federal packaging legislation has contributed to lower use of recycled materials.

**Misperceptions and negative attitudes** also become significant roadblocks to success.

- Some still think recycling should be a big money maker.
- Some factions in private industry find disposal the preferred waste management method.
- A portion of the public and many municipalities remain uninformed and unfamiliar with their responsibilities.
- There is too frequently a lack of vision among county and local leaders.

Finally, the **fragmentation of local government** in Pennsylvania remains a great difficulty. The Commonwealth's 2,700 municipalities quite simply cannot always provide efficient local government services. Intermunicipal and county-wide programs must be encouraged, and sometimes, even mandated.

### 3.3 *Opportunities*

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of Pennsylvania's recycling program, the Task Force discussed what opportunities existed to enhance the program. There was consensus that **the recycling movement needed to be redefined and reinvigorated**.

One of the most important actions is the building of alliances that will allow the good news about recycling to be spread beyond recycling professionals. An important ingredient in this recipe will be the delineation and achievement of political goals. As we strive to meet this goal, it will be important to build the local building blocks that are so important in affecting significant political change or action. At the same time, we must try to contribute to a change in national policy whenever possible.

We must do an even better job of **highlighting our successes**. This effort must reach out to the public, elected officials, business, and industry. We should convey the message that recycling is part of a progression toward more **environmentally sustainable economic development**. Recycled feedstocks, products, and packages should be the predominant trend in industrial expansion. Part of this effort must include a refocusing of our marketing efforts to better understand the dynamics of the international marketplace.

The expansion and enhancement of partnerships and communications will also be of great value. While public/private partnerships maybe an important piece of the puzzle, intermunicipal cooperation may be equally valuable.

The Task Force also mentioned several other more specific initiatives that are crucial for the ultimate attainment of these broad goals:

- The stabilization of markets through long-term contracting should be explored as often as practical.
- Consider the expansion of materials eligible for funding under Act 101.

- Consolidate other environmental education initiatives, linking recycling to water and other natural resource management.
- Part of that effort would be enhanced communication and cooperative advocacy with other environmental resource management professionals.

#### 4. The Benefits of Recycling

##### 4.1 *Economic Benefits*

While recycling was primarily an environmental initiative, its economic benefits have been significant. The Task Force agreed that it was these economic benefits that were most attractive to politicians and policy makers. In order to make a case for this, members stressed the importance of ascertaining the number of jobs involved with the recycling industry. We have to look at recycling as a business in Pennsylvania and make others aware of that aspect.

Initial Task Force discussions raised these questions:

- How many jobs are generated by recycling and composting?
- How much tonnage does recycling generate?
- What are the cost comparisons between recycling and landfilling?

How many jobs can be attributed to/are a result of the recycling industry?

- Recycling Operations – Public & Private
- Scrap/Salvage Yards
- Compost Facilities
- Tire Recycling Operations
- Manufacturers using recycled materials

It was agreed that the number of jobs created by recycling was not perceived to be as important as the money recycling generates or how that affects the economy. We need to present specific dollar figures to policy makers because generalizations are not perceived to be as credible. Ten years after this investment was made by Pennsylvania, we have to show what the investment has produced. Tonnage numbers are important in helping make our point.

It was initially suggested that either the state or PROP itself do a study and gather this information to create a database. Since those early discussions, both the Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) and the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) have gathered and compiled extensive data for the Northeast and the United States. Despite the macro scale analysis, local information gaps are still significant. In response to this, PROP asked the Joint Legislative Conservation Committee (JLCC) of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to examine a number of the Commonwealth's municipal and county programs and recycling related businesses.

The JLCC case studies will highlight the economic and employment impacts of government programs, recycling businesses, and manufacturers that have prospered since the passage of Act 101. The JLCC will provide unbiased testimony that will give considerable credibility to these local economic impacts. Ultimately, decision-makers, both locally and statewide, will have access to information pertinent to their own districts and regions.

##### 4.2 *Environmental Benefits*

As noted previously, when the legislation was passed in 1988, recycling was an environmental initiative. Though some of the environmental issues that precipitated the legislation have fallen from the political radar screen, the fact remains that a number of environmental benefits are still being realized.

- Though landfill space is now abundant and relatively inexpensive, reducing the volume of waste through recycling efforts still has real benefits. Every ton of material diverted from disposal is one less ton of landfill capacity that is needed and will reduce demand for disposal facilities in the Northeast.
- It takes much less energy and water to produce products or packaging from recycled material than it does to make the same thing from virgin materials.
- Similarly, environmental degradation resulting from extraction of virgin resources is avoided when those materials are recovered rather than chopped down or dug up.

- The conservation of finite resources remains the most noteworthy benefit of recycling and is the primary reason that the US scrap industry has remained vibrant for more than a century.

Additionally, the Task Force agreed that one of recycling's most significant benefits was a fostering of an environmental ethic among the public and business. It has become the single most significant act of environmental stewardship engaged in by most Pennsylvanians.

As the Task Force discussed these issues, they concluded that:

- When researching the benefits of recycling and gathering related data, we should quantify how much landfill space we have saved, how many trees did not have to be cut for paper production, how much energy has been conserved, and other similar environmental benefits.
- Recycling is still generally less costly than landfilling. We need to make comparisons between landfilling and recycling and pass that information on to each municipality who fears that the amount of material going to landfills will rise if funding is cut.
- Many in both the public citizenry and government look at money issues first. It is important to show that sound environmental policies frequently bring economic benefits through more efficient use of resources and a reduction in waste generation and its high costs. Support for recycling will be enhanced by changing the perception of those preoccupied with economic concerns.
- It is the prospect of an unfunded mandate that will motivate many communities to support continued funding. The environmental benefits will be an issue to some, but not to many others. We should stress the environmental benefits of recycling when it makes sense to, but understand that it is a secondary issue to some.
- If the Recycling Fund is cut, the public will feel the effects economically. There needs to be continued funding for programs and incentives, etc. If the money is gone, municipalities will be faced with an unfunded mandate.

## 5. Recommendations

### 5.1 *State Government*

**Reauthorization of Act 101 funding** was seen as the highest priority among Task Force members. It was clear that the group felt there was much recycling and solid waste management work yet to be done in the Commonwealth. Even if priorities or policies are changed, a number of funding needs exist to address a variety of recycling, composting, education, and proper disposal initiatives.

**A solid waste management plan for the Commonwealth** is imperative to establish tangible long-term goals and plan for the implementation of the programs necessary to reach them. DEP and a subcommittee of the state Solid Waste Advisory Committee recently began this planning process. The Task Force enthusiastically supports this effort and encourages the Department to continue to move forward with this worthwhile initiative.

**The recycling technical assistance program** and related outreach by DEP should continue and be expanded. County and local government and private sector recyclers all need assistance in technical matters related to collection, processing, and use of recycled commodities.

**The Market Development Center** that was to be established by the Commonwealth should move forward. One of the key functions of such a center would be to provide technical assistance to private sector end users. Though markets were not specifically part of the Task Force's discussions, they are inexorably linked to the success of recycling in Pennsylvania. If we are to continue a transition to a more environmentally sustainable economy, industry needs help in overcoming both technical and attitudinal barriers.

**Overhaul the grant process.** While DEP has worked hard to streamline the grant process wherever possible, many aspects of the grant program remain cumbersome. While some progress has been made to improve the Section 904 Performance Grant process, Chapter Nine Grants generally remain a long, drawn out affair and have recently been only offered once a year. To address this, we would propose a working group or subcommittee to the state Solid Waste Advisory Committee to analyze and overhaul the grant programs.

## 5.2 Joint Efforts

**Recyclable commodity market challenges must be recognized and addressed.** Though it is difficult for us to influence many of the factors influencing worldwide markets, government and recycling professionals must come to:

- Better understand the idiosyncrasies of the marketplace
- Address the difficulties brought about by Pennsylvania's diverse demographics and geography.
- Deal with the inevitable price fluctuations that plague all commodity markets.

**Improve the quality of the materials being marketed.** This, too, must be a collaborative effort between the public and private sector, for material quality is impacted from the generator to the end-user. Among other things, this means that our collection and processing options must be carefully examined so as reduce the opportunity for contamination. It is especially important for us to carefully examine single-stream processing of both paper and packaging containers to be certain that it does not significantly affect commodity quality.

**Use of recycled feedstocks and packaging must be encouraged** at every opportunity and be legislatively mandated whenever possible. In addition to the technical assistance that might be offered by a market development center, incentives must also be put in place that will offer some financial motivation to businesses.

Government policy makers and private sector **decision makers must be further informed** about the many benefits, both economic and environmental, that have been brought about by a decade of recycling in Pennsylvania. The Recycling Economic Impact (REI) Study completed for both NRC and NERC clearly shows that recycling has had an extremely positive impact on the Commonwealth's economy and has also led to more responsible waste management practices in general. It is essential that decision makers come to fully realize and understand these benefits.

State government, commonwealth agencies, local government, and the private sector must all **realize the value of comprehensive waste management** and be willing to dedicate the resources or staff to handle waste responsibly. That means that all parties should:

- Dedicate sufficient resources to waste management programs. This could include environmental managers, recycling coordinators, and solid waste managers in the business world, state agencies, and local and county government.
- Provide professional training opportunities. While important to every faction, this is especially important to moderate sized businesses and local governments where waste managers wear several hats.
- Realize that moderate investments now will come to reduce both costs and reduce long-term liability associated with inadequate waste management and recycling practices.

## 5.3 Local/County Government

**All programs should strive to be as cost effective, operationally efficient collection and processing** as possible. This efficiency is the foundation of exceptional programs that have high diversion rates and successful marketing efforts.

**More cooperative and multi-municipal programs** can improve program efficiencies and should be encouraged. Pennsylvania's 2,700 municipalities bring operational and administrative challenges that can be improved with more cooperative efforts through councils of government arrangements; county-wide and multi-county programs; and joint service contracts, purchasing, and marketing when practical and appropriate.

**Special wastes must also be addressed.** Bulky wastes, appliances, tires, construction and demolition waste, and hazardous wastes are the materials most frequently found in illegal dumps. Local governments must be given the tools and resources and then take the initiative to provide education and enforcement to prevent illegal dumping and discourage other improper disposal.

**Public education regarding recycling and disposal** may be the single most important key to recycling and waste management success. PROP's work on both recycling and illegal dumping has shown that better education results in both better recycling and less illegal dumping. We encourage municipalities to adhere to their legal requirement

to provide semiannual educational outreach to inform and remind the public and business community of their recycling requirements. This educational outreach should build a foundation for the prevention of improper disposal and the an enhancement of recycling throughout the community.

**Local government and courts should treat waste and recycling offenses with the same urgency** as they would property blight, trash accumulation, and other conditions that present concerns to public health and well being. When education and other outreach are ineffective and local governments are forced to enforce recycling and waste regulations, we encourage the support and cooperation of the court system.

*The Pennsylvania Recycling Strategic Planning Task Force is made up of public sector recycling coordinators, private sector recyclers and business representatives, and staff from the state's local government associations. The Task Force was organized by the Professional Recyclers of Pennsylvania (PROP), the Commonwealth's affiliate to the National Recycling Coalition. PROP can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 25, Bellwood, PA 16617, by phone at 800-769-PROP (7767), or by e-mail at [prop@proprecycles.org](mailto:prop@proprecycles.org).*