

Solid Waste Disposal In Nashville: Two Approaches Reviewed

by John van der Harst

During the 1990 Winter Gathering of the Cumberland Greens, I was on a panel along with Nashville's then-Recycling Coordinator Ron Giles, among others. A debate surfaced between us over recycling methods. The audience was caught between dueling "experts'" claims. Who was right? What have subsequent events shown us? Giles emphasized curbside programs that depend on individual citizens separating certain recyclables out from trash. I favored a wet-dry system which depends on individual users keeping putrescibles (or compostables such as food wastes, diapers and so on) separate from all other wastes, thus only two separations. Then the wet portion is sent to a central composting facility; the dry items are sent to a centralized processing facility to sort out individual recyclables.

I shocked some attendees by pointing out that Giles's approach would reduce Nashville's solid waste by less than 3 per cent. Such poor results would discourage further recycling. (This approach was favored by the landfill industry.) Giles cited the goodness of mankind, claiming that citizens saving individual recyclables from trash would empower them to promote additional programs that would, incrementally, improve recovery rates over time.

What Happened?

Nashville's curbside program was implemented but then cancelled after several years of poor performance. It was replaced by "Curby" – a variation of the same approach, and applied to businesses as well as homes. Curby has reduced Nashville's solid waste by less than 2%. Its net cost per ton to Nashville is about 5 times landfilling cost.

Nashville did implement two programs I recommended: a permanent household hazardous waste collection center, and a wood waste recovery site. This has reduced solid waste more than all other Metro programs combined every year since it was implemented in 1992.

Nashville's recycling totals from all of its programs combined reached its present rate of about 8% of the waste stream in 1994, and has remained relatively static since then. Widespread public clamor for improvement dropped to near zero following implementation of both curbside programs. Recycle! Nashville, a once-large advocacy group, drifted into inactivity and was officially dissolved in 2005. Nashville still landfills about 1 million tons per year—2 tons per person—in landfills in 3 states.

Another Approach

Tennessee's Department of Corrections, on the other hand, decided to try wet/dry techniques. Despite having typically less cooperative participants than the general population to work with, the wet/dry approach has achieved 80% waste reduction,

and is now implemented throughout the Tennessee prison system. It also saves taxpayers about \$500,000 per year.

Back to the Present

Nashville's solid waste decision makers within the Department of Public Works—holdovers from the Purcell administration—still refuse to try the wet/dry approach. Can an aroused, enlightened public convince Mayor Karl Dean to attempt at least a pilot program? Contact this writer if you are interested in evolving our solid waste disposal program.

(You can reach John van der Harst at 615-227-3499.) This article has been provided courtesy of the Green Living Journal, a project of the Center for Holistic Ecology and the Cumberland Green Bioregional Council.