

By David Berry

Rural Curbside Pickup - A Path to Community Recycling

At the beginning of January, 1989, the Town of Bowdoinham began a ten-week pilot program to pick up recyclable materials at curbside throughout the Town. The program was designed to increase community participation in an existing recycling program, as well as to gather information on both rates of participation in and amounts of material generated by a curbside pickup program. Over the two years preceding the curbside project, the Town had operated a voluntary recycling program, utilizing a collection trailer open to the public at the Town Office and the Town Landfill. A downstroke baler was purchased in late 1986 with a matching grant from the DEP, and donated space in a former poultry barn was used to house baling operations and storage of cardboard, newsprint, and glass. A proposal for a mandatory recycling program with curbside pickup was tabled at a Town Meeting in September, 1988, by townspeople seeking more information on how such a program would be run, and what its impact would be on the solid waste budget. A Special Town Meeting was scheduled for early March 1989 to further discuss the recycling question in the light of any new information on specifically how such a program would operate, and how it would be financed.

Largely in response to these questions, in the late fall of 1988, the Sagadahoc Recycling Company offered to run a pilot program for the Town, with regular curbside

pickup of recyclable materials over a ten-week period. The program was designed with several goals. The first of these was to offer townspeople a chance to participate directly in a recycling program under the most favorable conditions. Flyers describing the program were distributed to every household, grain bags were provided for collection of recyclable materials, and the wide range of materials collected made it easy for people to quickly achieve significant reductions in the amount of material they were sending to the Landfill. A second aim of the program was to gather data on the volumes collected of the various materials, and the frequency of participation by Town residents. A master list of all Town residents was drawn up and each pickup was noted. Records of total volume by category (newspaper, mixed paper, mixed recyclables) were kept, and weekly measurements were made of the amount of material deposited on the Landfill itself. Perhaps the most important goal of the curbside pickup program, however, was that of providing townspeople, Town officials, and the Sagadahoc Recycling Company with invaluable day-to-day experience in preparing, collecting, and processing a wide variety of recyclable materials. This hands-on experience helped people see that recycling was not too difficult to carry out. Finally, the aspect of community consciousness-raising should be mentioned. The regular free Saturday collection and the sight of friends and neighbors putting out material for pickup are certain to have influenced people to try recycling at least once, and many residents found it much simpler to recycle than they had imagined.

The materials collected during the pilot program fell into four categories: corrugated cardboard, newsprint, mixed paper, and a catch-all group called mixed recyclables. This last category included all glass, plastic, and metal household containers, as well as styrofoam and rags, and clean used grain bags were handed out as receptacles for these items. Creating the mixed recyclables category simplified recycling efforts, since it reduced significantly the sorting required at the household level.

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Materials were collected curbside throughout the Town every Saturday, the same day the Landfill is open, by a two-man crew. A platform body truck was used as the collection vehicle, and materials were separated into large vegetable pallet boxes on the truck. All material was delivered to the Town's Recycling Facility at the poultry barn for baling and further handling of the mixed recyclables.

The entire ten-week pilot program was financed at a total cost to the Town of \$1500, through funds from a Solid Waste Study account, set up by the Town several years earlier. The cost of the program was so low largely because of volunteer labor provided by students from the Bowdoin College Environmental Studies Department. Two students worked each Saturday of the ten weeks as part of an Independent Study Project, and four others helped out on an irregular basis. Because of this free labor, Sagadahoc Recycling was able not only to collect and keep a tally of a wide variety of recyclable materials, but also to set up and try out a conveyor belt sorting line operation. In the same barn where the Town's baling and storage operations had been taking place, an old link-belt hay conveyor was set up horizontally with a large plywood hopper feeding it at one end. Pallet boxes of mixed recyclable materials were lifted with an electric hoist and dumped into this hopper, and, using a stop and start technique, the materials were fed onto the 30' long conveyor and sorted out into nine categories: plastics, clear glass, green glass, brown glass, returnable containers, styrofoam, aluminum, tin cans, and rags. Materials which had not been properly cleaned or were otherwise unsuitable passed off the end of the conveyor to a reject box and were taken to the Landfill. These materials made up a little more than 10% of the volume of the mixed recyclables. This entire sorting operation, however, had not been offered in the original Sagadahoc Recycling Company program of curbside pickup,

and turned out to be a tremendous bonus, made possible through the volunteer efforts of the Bowdoin students.

Community participation was likewise critical to the success of the program. Virtually all the equipment, with the exception of the Town's baler, used during the pilot program was loaned, at no cost to the Town, by townspeople. A local market gardener loaned an electric pallet truck, a farm offered the hay conveyor for the sort line, a filling station operator produced a barrel dolly, and the vegetable pallet boxes came from a former vegetable storage facility.



As the ten-week program progressed, and a sense began to emerge of the volume of recyclable materials in the waste stream and the amount of effort required to collect and handle this volume, the Town's Solid Waste Committee and Sagadahoc Recycling Company began searching for a workable proposal to present to the Town at the March Special Town Meeting to review the recycling question. The original recycling proposal, essentially rejected by the voters in September, 1988, called for mandatory recycling, and curbside pickup, then assumed to be the most simple way to enforce the "mandatory" aspect. Politically, neither idea was very popular. People do not like to be told they have to do something. And while curbside pickup is much more cost efficient than having half the community driving to a Landfill on the other side of Town, there remains an important social aspect to the Saturday ritual of "going to the dump" which many people are reluctant to give up. What was needed was a proposal which would achieve maximum participation in recycling without being mandatory, and would permit Townspeople to continue, as much as possible, to follow familiar ways of delivering their waste.

Not everyone in Town delivers trash to the Landfill. Approximately half the households are served by two commercial haulers, and any proposed system would require their support. Fortunately, both haulers understood that removing a significant portion of the Town's waste stream through recycling would extend the life of our Landfill, and both were interested in trying to establish a viable program. The curbside pickup program demonstrated to the haulers that much of the material their customers were putting out could be recycled. Several meetings were held between the haulers and Sagadahoc Recycling, and the idea which emerged as the most workable was that of establishing a user fee for material designated for the Landfill, with no fee charged for recycled materials.

The user fee system has many advantages over a mandatory recycling program. It provides a real incentive to recycle, instead of a requirement. There is no need for enforcement procedures or fine collecting, no need to paw through bags of garbage looking for bottles or newspaper. And perhaps most important, it raises revenues from the use of a dwindling resource to extend the life of that resource, encouraging thrift and discouraging waste.

The user fee system, which both the Solid Waste Committee and the Board of Selectman endorsed, was presented to the March Special Town Meeting on Recycling, and was overwhelmingly approved by a large turnout of voters. The pilot program run by the Town throughout the winter had given people a chance to try a recycling program, giving them experience in preparing and handling recyclable materials, rather than the more abstract and unfamiliar ideas proposed at the September, 1988 meeting. And the financing of the Town's expanded, but still voluntary, program seemed to be much more palatable to voters through the user fee system than through an across-the-board tax increase.

In conclusion, it must be said that the "climate" for introducing any recycling efforts is certainly more favorable today than it was two or three years ago. There is steady coverage in the media of this problem, and people are much more aware of it, and even anxious to be able to help with it, than they were previously.

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