

WASTE NOT: SEATTLE'S ROAD TO ZERO TRASH¹

Richard Conlin©

There's simply no room for waste in a carbon neutral city. Seattle has a plan to cut its contribution to landfills—and it's working. Richard Conlin is president of Seattle's City Council, which is overseeing the city's effort to become the first carbon neutral city in the United States. A key strategy that contributes to Seattle's carbon neutrality work was approved by the Council in 2007, when my Zero Waste Initiative was adopted as City policy. The things we throw away not only generate carbon as they decompose—they also carry the embedded carbon that was used in creating them. Zero Waste is a strategy that addresses both of those aspects. And the evidence is now in: We are succeeding in making real change happen.

In the 1980s, Seattle embraced a commitment to recycling a minimum of 60 percent of our solid waste. However, 20 years later, recycling peaked at only 43 percent. When I reviewed our policies in 2006-2007, it was clear that the current strategy promised only incremental improvements—and would require a long-term commitment to generating massive quantities of garbage and shipping it to a landfill. Seattle would continue to send a mile-long train of garbage to be buried in eastern Oregon—*every day*.

That meant that we would continue to consume resources at an expanding rate. It meant that we would keep burying toxic substances and valuable materials. And it meant that we would keep generating greenhouse gases from landfills, contributing to global warming. The Zero Waste Strategy set a new goal: Strive to reduce our waste stream to the minimum possible by making cradle-to-cradle responsibility the cornerstone for how we treat products. The cradle-to-cradle paradigm asserts that the materials we consume should continue to circulate in the production of new products—as organic matter destined for compost, as minerals for construction, or as synthetic compounds that can be transformed into the building blocks of other products. That puts waste reduction and recycling in the driver's seat, rather than in the caboose of the garbage train.

Key Components of the Zero Waste Strategy

We have overachieved. Waste sent to the landfill was cut by 10.2 percent in 2008 and 10.9 percent more in 2009, to a total of 352,000 tons. Expand recycling efforts by creating incentives for product stewardship. The principle of product stewardship (also called "extended producer responsibility") puts the responsibility for recycling and disposal on the manufacturers, thus giving them a financial incentive to extend the life of their products by using materials that can be reused or recycled.

- Collect food waste as part of mandatory residential weekly organics collection.
- Tailor similar approaches to commercial accounts, emphasizing programs like food waste collection from restaurants and paper recycling from offices.

¹ Yes! This Week, August 16, 2010

- Decrease waste production by banning some products from use in the City (such as Styrofoam and plastic bags), and working with businesses to develop take back programs for products like pharmaceuticals, paint, and electronic products.
- Design solid waste facilities and contracts to emphasize flexibility for better waste prevention, recycling, and disposal systems in the future, support full recycling of construction and demolition waste, and plan for major reductions in the amount of solid waste to be transferred and disposed of.

The complete set of policies can be found by going to seattle.gov/council, clicking on "research city laws," and reviewing Resolution 30990.

Implementation of Zero Waste has begun with mandatory residential organics collection, new policies around construction and demolition waste, bans on Styrofoam and other non-recyclable food service products, expanded product stewardship activities, and programs to promote additional recycling and composting in restaurants and other businesses. In the near future, the City will add mandatory compostable service for multi-family buildings, move to restrict the delivery of unwanted phone books, start a pilot program for collecting garbage every other week rather than weekly, and continue work to expand product stewardship and business recycling. We are likely to also consider a ban on plastic bags (as an alternative to a proposed fee, which was repealed in a referendum financed by \$1.5 million from the plastics industry), as well as limits or recycling requirements for other plastics, such as commercial plastic film used to wrap pallets.

The philosophy of Zero Waste includes adding a new indicator of our progress. While we will still measure our recycling rate, our new goal is to actually reduce the amount of waste that the City sends to the landfill. Resolution 30990 set as City policy that we will not dispose of any more total solid waste in future years than went to the landfill in 2006 (438,000 tons), and that for the next five years, the City will reduce the amount of solid waste disposed by at least one percent per year.

We have overachieved. Waste sent to the landfill was cut by 10.2 percent in 2008 and 10.9 percent more in 2009, to a total of 352,000 tons. While some of this decrease could be the result of the economic downturn (garbage generation traditionally decreases during recessions), probably at least half of it is the result of the actions taken through the Zero Waste Initiative. And there is a lot more action to come.

The Zero Waste strategy built on Seattle's success in water and energy conservation to create a new way of thinking about products and waste disposal. As we develop more sophisticated ways to make the cradle-to-cradle vision real, we will continue to make real progress towards our climate action goals.