

Success in Seattle

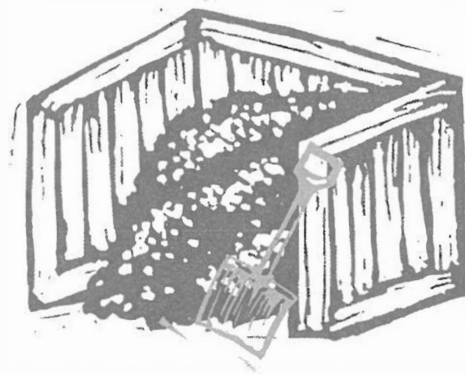
Seattle, Washington, serves as a model for how to overcome difficult obstacles when dealing with municipal solid waste. The model offers examples of a wide range of programs that creatively and economically cope with solid waste. The main problem occurred in the mid-1980s, when Seattle faced the closure of two landfills. In response to the closures, the city had to revise the solid waste management plan and find alternative solutions.

Community opposition was strong against building a waste-to-energy facility; therefore, other alternatives had to be considered. The city's Solid Waste Utility (SWU) concluded that a combination of waste reduction, including recycling, composting, and landfilling, was the best solution. In 1988, the SWU set a goal to recycle 60 percent of the city's waste stream by 1998. By 1992, Seattle was more than halfway toward its goal, making it one of the nation's recycling leaders.

The key to Seattle's success has been a combination of economic incentives, education, and innovation. One incentive that seemed to have a great influence on the amount of garbage citizens put out by the curb was implementing a fee of \$10.70 for every 19-gallon garbage container and \$13.75 for a 30-gallon container. Those rates encouraged both recycling and source reduction. To encourage an increase in recycling, the city began a curbside pickup program. The result is a remarkable recycling participation rate ranging between 75 and 90 percent.

The city has embarked on an aggressive composting campaign. Residents can choose to compost yard and kitchen waste in their backyards, to pay \$2 a month to have their yard waste collected, or to transport their yard waste to one of the city's transfer stations. Citizens who compost on their own are given free composting containers that can compost 240 pounds of kitchen and yard waste annually. Those who elect the pickup service are allowed up to 20 bags of yard waste each month. The city shreds or composts the material, which is then sold as mulch or soil enricher.

One of the most important ingredients of the Seattle success story is education. The city spends approximately \$375,000 per year to promote and educate residents about recycling. Schools, street fairs, and media events serve as focal points for citizen education. A monthly "Cash for Trash" award is given to citizens who do not throw away recyclable materials. A special program called the Block Leader Program helps volunteers to distribute recycling literature door-to-door to educate citizens about source reduction, recycling, and composting. All these efforts have made Seattle one of the numerous MSW success stories, showing what people can do if they set their minds to it.



Source: Gloria Danziger, *The Solid Waste Mess: What Should We Do with the Garbage?* Environmental Issues Forum (Washington, DC: North American Association for Environmental Education, 1992).