

**RECYCLING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
PROJECT #521**

**SLIPPERY ROCK IN BLOOM COMMITTEE
on behalf of
SLIPPERY ROCK BOROUGH AND
SLIPPERY ROCK TOWNSHIP**

BUTLER COUNTY

Maximizing Community Recycling through Targeted Partnerships

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through the
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Purpose of the Project

The municipalities of Slippery Rock Borough and Slippery Rock Township are located in Western Pennsylvania about an hour's drive from the City of Pittsburgh. Neither the Borough nor the Township is mandated to comply with the residential and commercial recycling program provisions of the Municipal Waste Planning, Recycling and Waste Reduction Act, Act 101. However, each does have a local ordinance that requires residents and commercial establishments to recycle. Another commonality of the municipalities is Slippery Rock University, which has portions of its campus physically situated within the boundaries of each one. The University is recognized for its environmental studies programs and has always been proactive in its campus recycling, composting and overall environmental sustainability efforts.

This project was prompted by a volunteer organization, Slippery Rock in Bloom, to complement the environmental objectives of their community redevelopment project. The group's mission was to promote recycling participation and to expand municipal recycling programs. To accomplish this, the group hoped to enlist support from local Borough and Township officials along with representatives from the University. To assist the group in exploring outside resources and grant offerings to fund the programs, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection staff and the Butler County Recycling Coordinator were invited to provide input. A consultant was retained through the Recycling Technical Assistance Program to evaluate current conditions, explain recycling methodologies and equipment and evaluate the dynamics of the proposed joint ventures.

The primary focus of the study was to determine an appropriate role for the Slippery Rock in Bloom environmental committee to play in the promotion and expansion of what are traditionally municipal services. The feasibility of developing programs in conjunction with or sponsored by the University was also a goal. How to introduce and promote Pay As You Throw (PAYT) mechanisms into the residential collection programs was an objective. The ability to implement and enforce existing ordinances, rules and regulations was of major interest.

Approach and Methodology

The project was launched with a series of discussions between Nestor Resources, Inc. and Mr. Ken Bennett, Chair of the Slippery Rock in Bloom Committee. Mr. Bennett offered background information on the progress and intentions of the Slippery Rock in Bloom Committee. Specifically, the conversation centered on the degree of success and/or resistance experienced by the Committee from their attempted involvement with residential recycling performance and collection contract issues.

On different occasions, the consultant met with the entire Slippery Rock in Bloom Committee. PADEP representatives and the Butler County Recycling Coordinator also participated. The exchanges were useful in determining the Committee's priorities and interests. Another purpose for the meetings was to assess the cooperation, approval and financial support from all potential stakeholders, including the University and the municipalities.

To further understand the dynamics of the situation, on several occasions, the consultant conferred independently with the Butler County Recycling Coordinator. Together they also

called upon local municipal officials to gage public opinion, political will, and financial constraints related to the Committee's proposed initiatives.

Topics of Discussion and Debate

During the meetings, the consultant explained industry terms, operational methods, contractual options, equipment capabilities and limitations. Current service offerings and potential options were discussed. For each option, the risks and benefits were examined, including: performance issues with the contractor; costs to the resident; incentives for recovery; public acceptance; and related issues.

The powers and authorities provided to the Borough and Township by the Pennsylvania Municipal Codes were presented. The public's emotional reaction to municipal waste related issues and the "willingness to pay" were stressed as major determining factors in policy development and program design at the municipal level. The unintended complications of the Committee's attempts to support and supplement the efforts of the municipalities were discussed at length.

The challenge of establishing recycling programs in multi-family dwellings was discussed in relationship to the size of the off-campus student population. Incentivizing landlords to comply with local ordinances through a carrot or stick approach was debated. Education and awareness to maintain participation and prevent contamination was considered in relationship to a revolving door of tenants.

Alternatives to containerized collection on multi-family properties, potential sponsorships and locations were considered. This prompted further conversation on the need to develop collection programs/events for a variety of items common to students and the community. E-waste, Household Hazardous Waste, bulky items, white goods and the abundance of materials abandoned during semester turn-over were identified as likely targets.

Much concern was expressed for lax enforcement of the requirements for commercial establishments to recycle due to the difficulties in placing containers in alleyways and the added cost.

Observations

Following are issues that surfaced during the various interactions with the stakeholders.

Waste and recycling collection has long been the realm of municipal government. It is both a service that people expect and one that they are often reluctant to pay for. It is also an arena where every voter has a view, an opinion and a preference, which are expressed indirectly at the polls. Local government officials face a delicate balance when adopting municipal waste related policies. The same is true for service choices that will affect the budget of every household and business within the jurisdiction. Because waste generation and recycling is considered a personal choice, enforcement is even more challenging. For these and other associated reasons, elected officials learn quickly to proceed cautiously in these matters.

Advocates for collection participation mandates and material handling requirements tend to underestimate the influence of the vocal minority. Landlords and property managers can be

among the most outspoken foes. Case studies show that by not following a slow and methodical transition plan, which includes convincing staff, council, the public and service providers, even the most reasonable and beneficial programs can be defeated prematurely. It is not out of the ordinary for the education and “sales” campaign for such projects to be initiated and evolve for 24 months in advance of the desired result. In a college/university environment, the continual revolving door of participants presents an even greater challenge during the implementation stage.

Unlike the contentious nature of waste management, making a town look better is a concept that nearly everybody can embrace. Local officials have a greater comfort level offering endorsements and support for these types of civic projects because the risk of adverse public opinion is minimal. Likewise, highly visible, positive energy projects are the perfect foundation for “town and gown” partnerships in college communities.

The positive impact of Slippery Rock in Bloom’s volunteer efforts is visible throughout the Borough. The group is focused, hardworking and diligent about attaining its goals and objectives. Their take charge approach was a perfect catalyst for the noticeable improvements on Main Street and beyond. Planting flowers, working on litter patrols, painting, installing, etc. are activities that provide direct gratification to those donating their “sweat equity.” In turn, it is also gratifying and rewarding to the organizers who can point to the tangible outcome of their vision. The Slippery Rock in Bloom Committee is that type of success story.

That is not to say that hours upon hours of planning, coordination and fundraising did not also go into their projects. Neither does it imply that the projects were easy. Understandably, the Committee’s previous achievements and amicable working relationship with local government may have ill-prepared them for the controversies and complexities common to municipal waste management. Expecting to apply the same strategies and levels of energy to community recycling and attain similar results, the Committee faced a cautious reception from the municipalities. In addition, a lack of basic waste industry operational knowledge occasionally took the Committee in a direction that was not easily implementable and thus primed for set-backs. Consequently, frustration rather than a sense of accomplishment prevailed.

On another front, the Committee’s interests and ideas related to recycling and material management have gained some measurable success. Faculty and students from Slippery Rock University show support and volunteer for Slippery Rock in Bloom related projects and events. As in any large organization, interdepartmental communication and coordination of resources proved to be the barrier rather than getting a general approval of the Committee’s proposals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both Slippery Rock Borough and Slippery Rock Township have existing municipal waste and recycling programs. The municipalities have a long standing working relationship with the Butler County Recycling Coordinator. That existing trust and comfort level appears to be effective in influencing change within the municipalities. However, those improvements have and will continue to occur in a more controlled and methodical fashion than might have been

envisioned by the Committee. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the changes that have been initiated.

With the assistance of the Butler County Recycling Coordinator, the municipalities have independently taken actions to provide better services. Some of these efforts were in a developmental stage and might not have been recognized, previously. In addition, at least one local service provider is expanding service options in conjunction with the municipalities.

A move to larger recycling carts to accommodate the greater variety of materials acceptable under single stream recycling programs is occurring in each municipality. Under the support of the Butler County Recycling Coordinator, the Borough submitted an application and was awarded an Act 101, Section 902 grant. In the Township one of the service providers is making this option available to residents and discussions have begun to determine if the Township will seek similar funding in the future. The carts are commensurate with industry trends and have been demonstrated to significantly increase recycling rates due to the capacity and convenience.

The consultant and the Butler County Recycling Coordinator have agreed to provide to the municipalities a variety of education materials about the benefits of single stream recycling for distribution, potentially by the local hauler.

Redirected Energies

Although the Committee had set the advancement of residential recycling as one of its goals, from outside observations, it seems that promoting and administering the curbside collection program is a task best controlled by the municipalities. There are however other local recycling needs that deserve greater attention. It is strongly recommended that Slippery Rock in Bloom redirect their skills and energies to support the implementation of these services.

Slippery Rock in Bloom has demonstrated strength in organizing and mobilizing volunteers to support community causes. These are the very skills that are needed to orchestrate successful collection events for Household Hazardous Waste, Electronic Waste and difficult to recycle materials such as white goods (appliances), tires and other bulky items. Coincidentally, these are the types of materials that are often abandoned during the semester student turnover. Both the municipalities and the University could benefit from these types of services. Although it may be difficult for Slippery Rock in Bloom to sponsor the events independently, due to regulatory and cost issues, they could still take the lead on behalf of the other stakeholders in organizing such collections.

Another avenue that is a good project for Slippery Rock in Bloom is the promotion of commercial recycling. Because the group represents business owners, it is a natural fit. Unlike the residential collection program, the commercial sector tends to approach recycling with less emotion and more attention paid to cost and customer service. The group is also a perfect conduit to promote food waste recovery and on-farm composting from local establishments. The University has a good organics recovery program that could be a model for other participants.

Finally, Slippery Rock in Bloom participates in local community events. They should institute requirements for recycling at these venues and help to implement the program. Butler County recently acquired the equipment necessary to establish a countywide mobile community event

recycling resource kit. Event organizers and municipalities will be able to obtain guidelines to establish a collection system and borrow the recycling containers, which are packaged and ready to be transported in a trailer dedicated for this purpose. Fairs, festivals and other gatherings are also a good place to promote the other collection events that Slippery Rock in Bloom may decide to help sponsor.

Summary Remarks

In Slippery Rock Borough and Slippery Rock Township, many opportunities present themselves to create a sustainable community model. Knowing when and where to engage certain skills and personalities goes a long way to advancing special interests like recycling and waste diversion. Slippery Rock in Bloom has proven itself as a dynamic community development organization. By directing their efforts to the scope of projects outlined in this report, the results are sure to be notable.