

Reduce trash sent to incinerator

By David Dow

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We've all heard that "one person's trash is another person's treasure." Now, with concern about diminishing natural resources, including fossil fuel, it's clear that trash has considerable value for our whole society, and we must recycle or compost most of what we now throw away: products, packaging, food scraps, etc. The waste management section of the Cape Cod Commission's Regional Policy Plan recommends that Cape towns divert 60 percent of solid wastes to composting/recycling from the current landfill/incineration approaches by 2012; utilize a regional approach to address this challenge; achieve a Capewide recycling rate of 60 percent by 2012, up from the current 31 percent; and develop full-cost accounting methods for solid waste costs.

This report recommended that the towns develop an integrated approach for recycling, composting, incineration and landfilling. In conflict with this plan, operators of the SEMASS incinerator in Rochester are urging Cape towns to send at least 50 percent of their waste to their facility, which would then cap Cape recycling at 50 percent. According to the SEMASS business manager quoted in a recent Times news article, SEMASS is giving discounts to communities that will sign contracts "ensuring that we have tons of waste coming to the facility for the long term."

Incinerators only capture one-fifth of the energy in trash. Recycling saves three to five times that amount. The greater savings is the difference realized by using recycled feedstock in manufacturing products instead of extracting virgin resources. Several Massachusetts towns already have recycling rates of more than 60 percent. If Cape towns encouraged source reduction through a pay-as-you throw program for door-to-door trash collection with free recycling, and coupled this with composting of organic wastes, we could reduce the volume of the solid wastes enough by 2015 to avoid the cost spike resulting from increased incineration costs (from less than \$38 per ton to \$100 per ton).

In the longer term, we should set a goal to move toward the **zero-waste** philosophy by 2020, which will create "green" jobs and save us money as we make the transition from waste to resource management. New business in reuse, repair, recycling and composting can provide a stable economic base for our cities and towns. Our current linear model of resource development moves from extraction of resources to production to consumption to waste management. This needs to be replaced by a sustainability perspective which mimics natural recycling loops and direct/indirect energy flow pathways. Public participation through recycling and source reduction will be a key component of the sustainability approach.

Dr. Paul Connett, director of the Zero Waste for Sustainability Project, has written a good overview of the zero-waste concept (<http://www.americanhealthstudies.org>).

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