

TRASH & RECYCLING LEARNING CIRCLE SUMMARY

Wednesday, June 12, 2024

[“The Story of Stuff”](#) will continue to evolve with local, regional, and statewide pressures over the next 25 years. Garbage and waste management, recycling, and composting are in the beginning stages of a revamped planning process, with the passage of significant amendments to Part 115, Solid Waste Management, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA 451.

Recycling rates in the United States are up for the first time in several years (the national recycling rate is close to 32%). Marquette County is at about 11% counting only in-county materials, the Central UP is closer to 8%, and if you go UP-wide it falls to 2-3%.

Climate change may create demographics and population changes that will open opportunities to get away from the business-as-usual “cradle to grave” approach to trash and recycling and build a circular economy in our region. The Trash & Recycling Learning Circle participants discussed how Marquette County can leverage existing strengths such as its central location, recycling, and composting facilities to reduce pollution and strengthen our workforce and economy.

THE IDEAL VISION FOR TRASH & RECYCLING IN OUR REGION

Participants shared their ideal vision for waste management in the region’s future (the next 10-25 years). In the table discussions, many participants noted the importance of improving education and outreach about materials management and recovery across the region and across multiple generations. The key characteristics of our ideal future include the following:

Sustainable Practices: Many participants noted the importance of a future that has more sustainable practices as part of everyday action, including increasing initiatives to reduce plastic packaging, promote more reuse of goods, support (curbside and industrial-scale) composting, and transition away from disposable or single-use items as a regular practice, potentially assisted with policy.

Infrastructure and Policy Support: Participants also noted the importance of policies supporting improved waste management, recycling, and composting systems. Beyond policy, there needs to be support for the necessary infrastructure, including the establishment of municipal compost facilities and improved recycling transportation or drop-off networks. Regardless, building institutional and systemic changes are necessary to enhance waste management practices in our region.

Governmental Involvement and Collaboration: The ideal future will include national, state, and local governments driving change through legislation, promoting sustainable practices, and fostering collaboration among many entities for effective waste management solutions.

Behavior Change: Every table recognized the need for a cultural and behavioral shift to actualize a future with widespread responsible waste management. From increased individual and household intentionality to community-level outreach and education to create a more informed and proactive set of norms within our region.

Community Engagement and Education: Related to behavior change, participants were adamant about improved and increased waste management education at all levels. Resources for everything from technical training to homeowner and classroom recycling/compost methods is needed. Additionally, there is a need for community members to understand the true cost of waste and its management.

FACTORS INFLUENCING OUR MATERIAL MANAGEMENT FUTURE

Participants explored and explained how our trash, recycling, and compost systems will be impacted by several key factors over the next 25 years. The factors that are most likely to influence our ideal waste management future include:

Policy and Legislation: Participants emphasized the need for state laws and policies that incentivize reduced consumption and increased recycling. We will need legislative pressure to shift funding and systems to be more sustainable (as the default). We will also need to explore financial incentives (e.g., deposit programs) to promote the robust recycling required for a circular economy.

Community Engagement and Behavior Change: Highlighting the importance of public opinion, behavior change, and education as key factors in achieving sustainable waste management practices, especially focusing on starting young with children and promoting field trips to understand waste disposal processes.

Infrastructure and Logistics: To improve materials management in our region we need to address challenges, like the lack of infrastructure for specialty (or “odd materials”) recycling. Many of the logistical challenges are also tied to the need for efficient and cost-effective transportation of materials. To overcome these challenges we need to better incorporate waste management into city and county master planning activities across the region.

Economic Considerations: Economics play a large role in the viability of our ideal future, both at the local and national levels. If we can create an ideal local/regional closed-loop system then we might simultaneously identify opportunities for new economic development. Recycling innovation could be an entrepreneurial opportunity (e.g., aggregators or intermediaries help to process difficult-to-recycle items).

Social and Cultural Factors: Local attitudes about recycling and composting may shift in the years to come, especially as the population changes. There may be new, or unprecedented influence on waste management policies because of changing political and social dynamics in the

region. Recycling rates could also suffer with an increase in poverty and competition to meet basic needs persists. Finally, volunteer burnout can diminish recycling rates (e.g. battery collection).

NEXT STEPS: HOW DO WE ACHIEVE OUR IDEAL FUTURE?

To create systemic change in waste management and sustainability, the following key actions and strategies are proposed:

Education and Demonstration: We need to emphasize the importance of education, particularly through demonstrations, to make a significant impact. We need to support educational initiatives that inform the public about waste disposal and recycling processes. Developing an all-age curriculum and providing real-world learning experiences through field trips (to MRF, Partridge Creek Compost, etc.) can inspire action.

Community Engagement: For real change to happen we need to foster relationships with neighbors and mobilize local networks to model and encourage behavior change within our communities. We can also encourage active participation in the democratic process by filling vacancies on boards and commissions.

Government Outreach and Communication: We need to enhance outreach efforts by local governments to residents. Effective communication about new waste management plans and requirements will improve understanding and action. Likewise, there is an opportunity for better communication between county and local governments to ensure alignment and shared strategies. CUPPAD's new Materials Management Plan is a great example. Let's promote the plan and help to foster a shared vision for our region's future.

Spotlight Current Successes: Leverage the Recycle 906 brand to highlight local and regional waste diversion champions. Partner with organizations like Partridge Creek Compost to promote curbside composting services for businesses and residents. Encourage local stores and restaurants to adopt compostable products and practices and then promote their efforts.

Funding and Incentives: Apply for grants to support and subsidize sustainable behavior shifts. Use grant funding to invest in capacity building and infrastructure development. Advocate for subsidies from organizations like MDARD for curbside recycling collection. Create incentives for current business owners and opportunities for entrepreneurs to improve the waste management sector.

Keep it Neutral: Keep the issue of waste management apolitical and focus on implementing long-term, sustainable solutions rather than short-term fixes.