

The Berkeley Model: Less Waste—More Jobs

By Martin Bourque and Amy Kiser

On the first day of spring this year, Berkeley's city council unanimously approved a zero waste resolution - one of the first in the nation. The resolution officially adopts a 75 percent waste reduction goal for 2010, and establishes a zero waste goal for 2020.

What Does Zero Waste Mean?

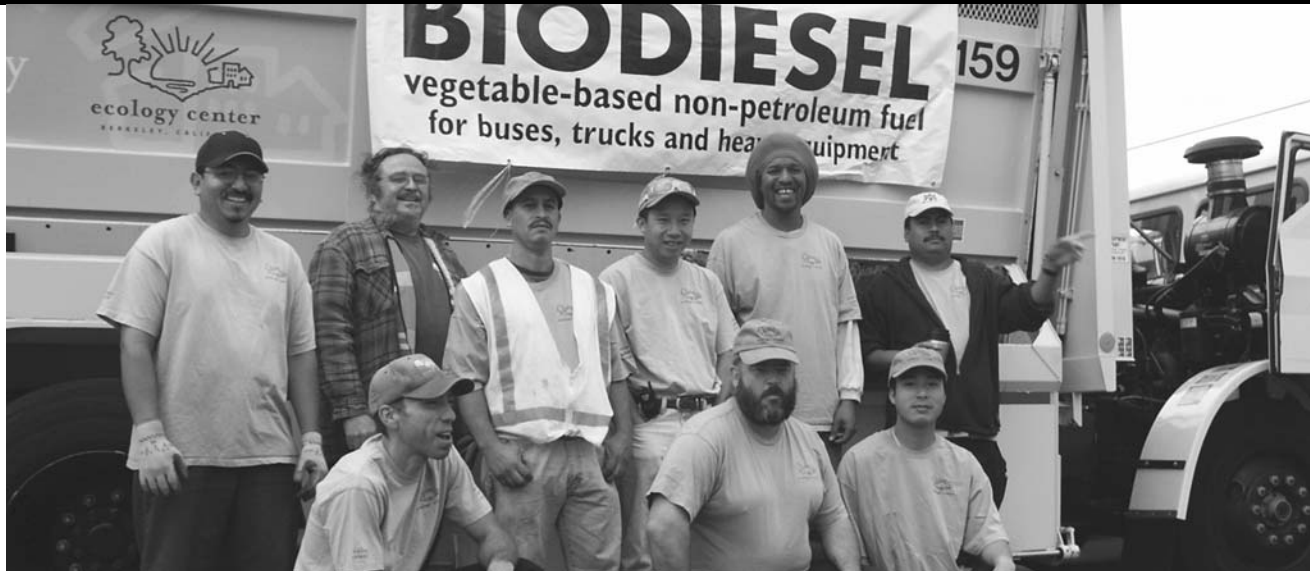
If it can't be reduced, reused, repaired, rebuilt, refurbished, refinished, resold, recycled, or composted, then it should be restricted, redesigned, or removed from production. The goal is to combine aggressive resource recovery and industrial redesign to eliminate the very concept of waste. Eventually, the community's resource-use system will emulate natural cyclical processes, where no waste exists. While Zero Waste may seem like an ambitious aim, Berkeley's history is full of people taking chances on new ideas. The idealism that thrives here has produced many tangible demonstration projects that have helped spawn programs in cities across the globe. For example, over thirty years ago, the Ecology Center pioneered curbside residential recycling. Much has changed since those early days, when a single flatbed truck roamed the streets collecting bundled newspapers. Today, Berkeley's recycling programs (residential, commercial and drop-off) are a multimillion-dollar enterprise providing over 40 green-collar jobs and saving nearly 20,000 tons of resource-rich material from the landfill. Curbside recycling has gone from a "crazy" vision to an environmentally sane, mainstream service offered across the country.

What Makes Berkeley Different?

Unlike many cities across the United States, Berkeley possesses its own recycling and solid waste facility, which is operated by the city and three local nonprofits—the Ecology Center, Community

Conservation enters (CCC), and Urban Ore. This unique situation offers many important benefits. Local control allows for higher environmental standards and greater efficiency, as well as familiarity with our own waste stream. Costs for these services are kept low, and good green-collar jobs remain in the city rather than being sent elsewhere or automated out of existence. Other East Bay cities contract their solid waste programs out to corporate waste haulers, who transport their garbage and recyclables to large-scale regional facilities, where little is known about what actually happens to it. Because Berkeley's solid waste program is in-house, we get to decide what happens with our materials.

As an example of local control, Berkeley voters mandated that collected recyclable materials be put to their "highest and best use." This is why we sort glass into three color camps—green, brown, and clear—while many other recyclers have eliminated this step. The bottles we collect are melted down and turned into bottles again at a regional foundry. Some end up back in Berkeley at Pyramid Brewery, a local ale manufacturing company. The energy and resources that went into making the glass in the first place are conserved. When glass of different colors is mixed and melted, a murky color results that is unfit for new bottles. Mixed glass can be "down-cycled" into asphalt or fiberglass insulation, but it is often used instead of dirt as "alternative daily coverage," with the sandy covering heaped over trash at the landfill every day, to keep flies and odors down. But when Berkeley's residents place glass bottles in their



recycling bins, they can be sure those bottles actually get recycled and don't end up in the dump.

For-Profit Vs. Non-Profit

In 2001, the Ecology Center transitioned its fleet of recycling trucks to run on biodiesel, an alternative fuel made from recycled restaurant grease. Later, Berkeley's garbage trucks, school buses, heavy equipment, and fire trucks also made the switch to biodiesel. This significantly lowered asthma and cancer causing emissions released by our fleets as well as the city's dependence on foreign oil. Had Berkeley's recycling program been handled by corporate haulers, such a forward-thinking initiative would never have gotten off the ground. Unlike the Ecology Center, corporate waste haulers are rarely proactive on issues unrelated to their bottom line, such as air quality and vehicle emissions. Furthermore, for-profit solid waste companies such as Waste Management, Inc. or BFI own landfills. They charge per ton for every scrap of waste that goes to the landfill; therefore they have a financial interest in communities continuing to generate large quantities of garbage. It is a core part of their business. They also offer recycling services because most cities demand it, but minimizing waste is not their mission.

Jobs and Revenue Stay in Berkeley

Because Berkeley's solid waste operation is locally based, the jobs generated by the city's waste stream remain local. The city has its own fleet and unionized crew, as does the Ecology Center and the Community Conservation Centers (CCC). A model "green-blue" partnership, recycling is an environmental endeavor that provides local, well-paying, green-collar jobs. Recycling helps support the local nonprofits, businesses, and community agencies that partner with the city to handle discards. Even with all the extra steps required - sorting, baling, cleaning, and selling of those bottles, cans, and papers - recycling remains a cheaper alternative than paying landfill fees, thanks to the income generated by selling the materials. Recycling contradicts the myth that communities must choose between jobs and the environment. Recycling creates jobs while costing the residents less.

Between the Ecology Center and CCC, Berkeley's institutional recycling programs constitute a multi-million dollar industry. This money stays here; it doesn't leave in the form of shareholder profits or CEO bonuses.

Moving forward toward the Zero-waste goal, even more jobs, more re-usable materials and more revenue will strengthen the local economy.

For more information about Berkeley's pioneering recycling programs visit www.ecologycenter.org.

This article is excerpted from Recycled Content, a publication of the Ecology Center. Executive director Martin Bourque and development director Amy Kiser work at the Ecology Center.

Community-based Clean Up

By Preeti Shekar



Well before socially responsible businesses became fashionable, Olin Webb and Allen Edson transformed their environmental contracting business, Remediation Services Inc. (RSI) into a community-based enterprise, employing workers from the very communities they work in. Their organization has a triple impact on local communities. They reduce toxic exposure by removing contamination. They strengthen the local economy by hiring and training community members for the work. They help create long term economic health by establishing new sites for economic development within formerly blighted communities.

Since 2002, RSI has been a specialist in environmental field services in the San Francisco bay area, with services ranging from soil and groundwater remediation, hazardous waste removal and transportation, and restoration of disposal sites.

RSI evolved from the environmental advocacy work of Webb, who hails from Bay View Hunters Point, and Oakland-based Edson. Webb and Edson have been environmental justice advocates since the early 1990s, and have played a pioneering role in the redevelopment of brownfields, which are derelict sites contaminated by toxic chemicals. These sites disproportionately impact working class, low-income, and people of color communities, who typically live close to such sites.

Webb and Edson realized that although brownfield restoration projects enabled hazardous sites to be cleaned up and developed, millions of dollars were being paid to external remediation contractors who had no ties or responsibility to the community. They decided that there was no reason for money to leave their already impoverished communities. To accomplish this goal, their organization began to train and hire workers from the communities where the clean-up work was occurring.

As members of the National Black Environmental Justice Network and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), Edson and Webb have always been passionate about rebuilding communities holis-

tically. “Conventional redevelopment models reflect the inherent racism in the way projects are set up,” noted Webb. “So we wanted to make a positive, long term impact in the communities we worked in.” And that’s precisely what they have been doing, by training local community members to be skilled workers, including the 40-hour training to be able to work with hazardous material.

RSI has successfully reached out to undereducated, underutilized black youth—especially people who have been through the criminal justice system. RSI has also teamed up with Young Community Developers (YCD), a community-based job-training agency in Bay View Hunters’ Point, to regularly hire disadvantaged workers for community projects. RSI’s wages are on par with industry pay, averaging \$25 per hour, in addition to vacation, and medical benefits.

One of its long term goals is to hire and sustain workers in San Francisco, Oakland, and Richmond—cities that are slated to experience rapid development in the coming years with major brownfields grants lined up.

RSI’s business model seeks is best summed up by co-owner Edson: “We did start out on a risky venture but its one that has paid off both to the business and to the communities.”

For more information, visit www.remediationservicesinc.com.

Preeti Shekar is a freelance journalist and a producer at KPFA radio’s Women’s Magazine.

& the Race, Poverty Environment

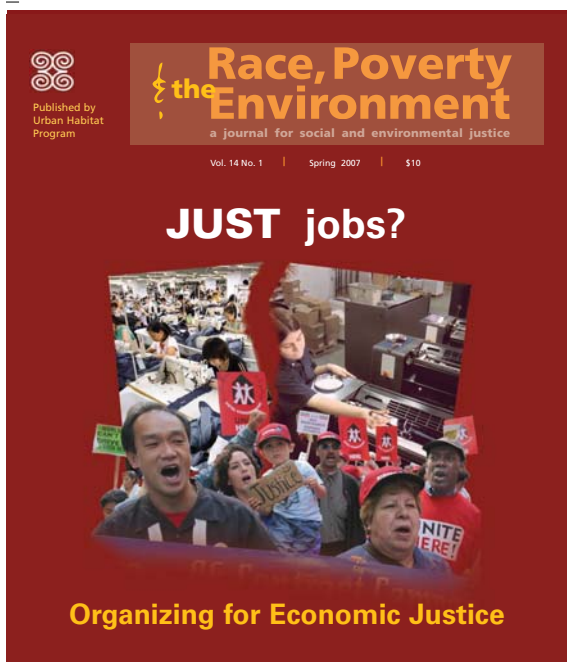
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