

Circular File: Edifice Complex

Mar 1, 2009 12:00 PM, By Chaz Miller

You may as well use a dart board to predict waste trends 50 years from now.

The idea that two Maryland counties want to build a new disposal facility isn't earth-shattering news. But according to a newspaper in one of those counties, officials are planning a facility large enough to accommodate growth in waste production over the next 50 years. When I read that I thought to myself, how can they possibly predict how much garbage they will make over the next half century, much less what products and materials will be used during that period?

State officials didn't claim to be all-knowing. They only predicted how much trash the counties would make in 2015, when the facility is supposed to open. Even then, I wondered what assumptions they used in their estimates. No doubt the population will be greater. But will the economy be strong or weak? What kind of trash will we produce in five years? For instance, will that local newspaper still be printed on dead trees, or will it be replaced by a faster and less material-intensive online publication?

These questions become even more important because, according to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's \(EPA\)](#) latest data, we made less garbage in 2007 than in 2006. This marks the first time we have ever made less garbage during a strong economy. Waste generation is a function of population and economic trends. More people mean more trash unless the economy is in decline. A healthy economy has always meant more waste. Since EPA began running its garbage censuses in 1970, it has detected declines in waste generation during economic recessions, but never while the economy was flat or growing.

Until now. According to EPA, we made 254 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2007. That includes materials that were recycled or composted and is 40,000 fewer tons of trash than in 2006. For the first time since EPA began measuring garbage, America made less waste in a year when the economy and the population were growing.

EPA didn't seem to know what to make of this. Instead of declaring victory in the war on waste, the agency simply said that waste generation in 2007 was "similar" to that in the previous year. The agency noted that every material in the waste stream grew in size or was flat, except for paper. The 2 million ton decline in the use of paper wiped out the gains in the use of other materials. This latest data only confirms the ongoing decline in the use of paper products, especially newspapers and office paper.

The popular press is now awash with stories about the recent decline in the size of the waste stream as a result of the economic recession. Some local governments are worried that the falloff in trash will have a negative impact on their solid waste programs. Like junkies on crack, they got used to the rush of "easy" money and now aren't sure how to accommodate the hole in their

budgets. These governments are talking about cutting back on services or raising fees to make up for lost revenues.

They have hard decisions to make. And before those two Maryland counties give into the allure of building a monument to garbage and committing their taxpayers to massive bonded debt, I hope they will think long and hard about the future of waste.

Opinions in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the National Solid Wastes Management Association or the Environmental Industry Associations. E-mail the author at atcmiller@envasns.org.

Chaz Miller is state programs director for the Environmental Industry Associations, Washington, D.C.

http://www.wasteage.com/Landfill_Management/dart-board-waste-trends-200903/index.html