

Daily Camera, Boulder Colorado

Curbside collections in Boulder

By Eric Lombardi
Sunday, June 29, 2008

I am often asked these days how an aspiring locality can become a Zero Waste Community. My answer is unequivocal and to the point: The first step and immediate job at hand is to make the single mixed-waste trash can obsolete as quickly as possible. That can begin to happen when people in households and businesses sort their discards (i.e. trash) into three categories: recyclables, compostables and "whatever's left." In July, the Boulder City Council will consider the implementation of this three-bin system as other progressive and environmentally-concerned communities such as San Francisco, Toronto and Nova Scotia have done with great success. Like them, we need to understand that our "waste stream" is actually resource rich. Then we will reduce not only the amount of landfilling and associated methane gas, but also reclaim resources to benefit the earth.

How important is "community composting" to our overall environmental and economic goals? A new report called Stop Trashing the Climate presents data and information which shows that rotting food waste and other "biowaste" items in a landfill produce massive amounts of GreenHouse Gas methane (CH₄) and that as a result, landfills are the largest source of anthropogenic methane in the world. Our best available technology can't capture even half of that gas at a landfill. According to Rafe Pomerance, the founder of the Climate Policy Center in D.C. (and yes, he is the brother of our esteemed local social analyst Steve Pomerance), "Methane will have an impact equal to carbon dioxide on global warming over the next 20 years."

The new report shows that a Zero Waste Society (where 90 percent of our discards are recovered by 2030 for recycling, reuse or composting) will reduce greenhouse gas emissions equal to shutting down 21 percent of the coal-fired power plants in America! A recent study in California showed that there are markets for 83 percent of the resources currently being thrown into landfills. The bottom line, as stated in the Stop Trashing the Climate report, is that pursuing a less wasteful society is one of the fastest, cheapest and most effective strategies for protecting the climate.

We do a very good job as a community in our pursuit of Zero Waste. We do need to accomplish more. Curbside collections of organic resources is essential to decreasing the production of the greenhouse gas methane and to increasing the production of rich soil

amendments. The creation of a local community composting industry could become a foundation cornerstone for reviving our local farm soils and moving away from chemical food production.

Once we view our waste as actually being resources, we can untangle ourselves from one aspect of living too large on our earth. We can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, save resources (oil, gas, metals, trees, water, etc.) and produce new products from old that benefit us. It is another step to creating a more sustainable lifestyle.

Our community and our elected leaders care about our environment and lifestyle. We are fortunate to be committed trailblazers. Let's take the next step--design new solutions to the concerns which have been identified, and move forward on community composting. We need a three-bin system that collects recyclables, compostables, and whatever's left. It is the right thing to do.

Eric Lombardi is the Executive Director of Eco-Cycle, and a co-author of the study mentioned in this article, which can www.stoptrashingtheclimate.org.