

MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Local Recycling Program

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



The Institute for Local Self-Reliance recommended a recycling program in which businesses and households separate glass, plastic, metal, and paper on their own.
PHOTO: FOTOLIA/IMAGEEGAMI

More and more folks—all over the country—are taking their lives into their own hands and building solar homes, sowing community gardens, and launching small businesses. However, in some situations where alternative action is needed, *individual* efforts simply can't accomplish *enough*. For example, a local church or civic group can—in the course of a year—recycle some hundreds of tons of material that would otherwise become a trash problem ... but dealing with the *millions* of tons of waste that's produced annually by a large urban area demands large-scale planning.

A Practical Plan

Recently, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance had an opportunity to design a recycling program to handle the 600 tons of waste produced in Atlantic County, New Jersey each day! Our aim was to find ways to recycle as much of the refuse as possible ... since the county's landfills are not only filling up fast, but are health hazards as well!

Here, in summarized form, is the course of action the ILSR proposed:

- [1] That county residents and businesses separate their own refuse, using one container to hold paper, glass, and metal ... another for any remaining waste.
- [2] That the county build two waste-processing plants, the first to further separate the paper, glass, and metal for resale ... the second to convert the remaining material into energy.
- [3] That all county landfills except two be closed (the remaining pair of dumps would be upgraded to eliminate possible health hazards).

We felt that two-group garbage separation would be relatively easy for residents *and* economical for the county. It should require only a few minutes per week for a household or business to sort its refuse into two piles. (The messier, more time-consuming jobs of bundling the paper, separating the glass by color, and sorting magnetic and nonmagnetic metals—that must be done prior to sale—could be accomplished by a *paid* staff at the recycling center itself.)

Most of the refuse that can't be recycled could then be burned to produce steam energy ... which, in turn, could be used to provide space heating and cooling for the new casinos soon to be built in Atlantic City.

But Is It Local?

We think the plan is impressive, but—you may ask—can a program that involves a \$6 million capital investment, *and* will cost some \$3 million a year to operate, be said to reflect the goals of local self-reliance? In this case we think the answer is "yes" ... because *no* effort to conserve resources and redirect them for the benefit of local communities is likely to come about *without* such a comprehensive plan.

Consider, for example, the plight of the half-dozen or so community groups that are *now* operating local recycling centers in Atlantic County: The projects—run by churches, civic clubs, etc.—can't get fair prices for the material they recycle because the organizations aren't able to deliver their "products" in large enough quantities to command top dollar! And because the recyclers *don't* get good prices, they aren't able to afford the equipment necessary to *generate* large amounts of goods! The groups are, therefore, caught in a classic vicious circle!

Furthermore, a comprehensive waste management plan—even if it were *funded* by the state and federal government—would not necessarily take either participation or control away from the local communities. In the first place, if people want to turn waste into a resource instead of a liability, they'll have to fight for a plan such as this one on the *community* level ... by organizing support in their neighborhoods and so forth. Then again, a recycling program that begins—as does our proposed plan—with the separation of waste at the home and local business level demands citizen participation of the most basic and vital kind. In addition, the Institute's proposal includes an option by which communities could assume the *management* of the recycling and energy-recovery enterprises. And finally, each area would, of course, benefit from the jobs created by the program.

It's true that the ILSR plan *wouldn't* make local Atlantic County communities individually self-sufficient in waste disposal: The towns would depend on one another and even on districts outside of the county. However, the local communities would be given the chance to put their own resources to work for their own

benefit . . . and that, we feel, is real local self-reliance!

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts ... which is why we've made this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' regular features.