

# “Why Your City Should Consider Zero Waste Policies”

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To answer this important and timely question, we need to first be clear on what we mean by Zero Waste Policies. I am concerned that too many people, and even presenters at this conference, are confusing Zero Waste with Zero Landfilling/Burning. While these are important end-of-pipe goals, they are only one piece of the larger revolution called Zero Waste. What is truly revolutionary about the next step of the recycling revolution, which has been a wonderful and unqualified success, is that Zero Waste now takes us upstream to the headwaters of the waste problem which is a design problem. Zero Waste is nothing less than the transformation of the industrial production system on our planet, and in fact, we'll never achieve Zero Landfilling/Burning until we do this. And the key issue upstream for us all is called producer responsibility.

So when we talk about why our cities should get excited about going upstream and addressing a problem that is far larger than their community, such as producer responsibility, it is far different and much more difficult than talking about maximizing recycling and composting systems.

I do not have the answer to this challenge, nor does the GrassRoots Recycling Network, nor do any of the other Zero Waste advocates that I know around the world. But, at least we know that it's the right question to be asking.

But I do have four partial answers to this question that I use back home to encourage my local leaders to support Zero Waste policies:

- (1) All the good arguments for supporting Zero Waste in general, including the protection of our environment, the conservation of natural resources, local economic development and the protection of the public health, today and into the future;
- (2) The Zero Waste revolution is a source of new energy for the community and especially for the city employees who oversee the local recycling/composting programs;
- (3) The Zero Waste goal of Zero Landfilling/Burning is the most cost-effective strategy for the long-term management of the costs associated with the local discard management system;
- (4) The Zero Waste agenda opens the door for individual City Council members to step into a community leadership role that promises a better future for their constituents, and this feeds directly into the reason they these individuals are on the City Council to begin with.

But the question of “why” a City Council should care is only half the story. The question of “how” do we act upon that concern is the core of our challenge since moving toward Zero Waste is going to require some “new rules” at the local economic/market level, and that is going to require new laws.

Let me ask the audience at this point how many people can raise their hand because they were personally responsible in a significant way for any new laws being created in their town? (Note: only about five hands went up in an audience of over 100 people).

This is a problem because we are never going to achieve the vision of Zero Waste without re-writing the rules of the game by which businesses pursue profit. In my discussions with business leaders in private settings, the general consensus seems to be that they are not against new rules so long as they are applied even-handedly across the board and affects their competition the same as themselves. A vice-president at Dupont once told me in the early 1990's that they would become the cleanest company in the world if the rules supported that direction as the most profitable as well. Individual business leaders, no matter how well meaning, are helpless themselves within a structure that demands maximum quarterly profits at any legal cost.

I believe it is a mistake of the environmental community and Zero Waste advocates to expect for-profit companies to act in way that doesn't support their primary mission of making profits. If acting as a "socially responsible" business means doing something that reduces their profits, then the vast majority of businesses will not do it. And I think that's OK because keeping the profit motive "pure" has proven to be the most powerful mechanism in the world for changing history. The profit motive is like the ring in the bull's nose which doesn't take much effort to pull into a new direction. It is now our duty as citizens to take hold of that ring by re-writing the rules of how profit can be made so that the cleanest companies on Earth win.

To do this, we all need to know how to change society's laws at the local level, so the rest of my presentation is a quick primer in Community Organizing 101. It would be my hope that in ten years when I return to speak at this conference and I ask who in the audience has changed some local laws that most hands in the audience would go up.

### **The Zero Waste Politics of Change**

#### **How do local decision-makers "hear" the need for Zero Waste growth?**

- 1. They hear the chorus of a lot of voters banding together**
- 2. They hear an opportunity for personal career advancement**
- 3. They always hear "cost savings" to the City**
- 4. They hear "tax cuts"**
- 5. Some even hear the sound of their own conscious \*find these!! they're your insiders!**

## Two Basic Principles:

**#1. Zero Waste is first a social issue.**

- **The “market signals” are wrong – the dirtiest now win!**
- **There is a “cost” to the destruction of our natural systems**
- **Until the “environmental externalities” are accounted for - the “cleanest” will never win!**
- **A revolution in thinking is required ... the global economy was once built upon the bodies of **slave labor**... the current global economic engine for growth is built upon the destruction of our natural world. Slavery didn't end because of economic pressures.**

**#2. “The Root of all Significance is in Comparison”  
-JP Sartre’**

**\*The “significance” of Zero Waste arises when comparing it to the alternatives...burying and burning! Easy sell !!!**

## Community Organizing 101

**(A) Create an “extreme debate” with big differences between the alternatives ...Recyclers have a very positive story to tell, – the Wasters will put forward the “lower cost option” scenario. (read Saul Alinsky “Rules for Radicals”)**

**(B) Force the other side to present a vision of their alternative to Zero Waste, keep the pressure on them by defining the debate!**

**Now, back to the 5 things that local politicians hear...**

- ✓ **First, find your “insider” (the one that listens to their conscience)**
  - **Take them to lunch**
  - **the Goal of the lunch meeting... “**pierce their armor**” –**
  - **jointly strategize and create a “winning image”**

✓ **Second, go after the community – “The People” –**

- Approach local groups and **Create a “Community Zero Waste Task Force”**

✓ **Third – Count the Votes**

- Target your people and create some local “**eco-hero’s**”
- **non-traditional environmentalists**, (like Republicans), don’t want to be left out – they are often eager to talk (**Republican Senator in Colorado helped launch W4W rpt!**)

✓ **Fourth – go to local paper and cultivate a reporter who will be “Zero Waste friendly”**

✓ **Fifth - The Community Launch and Victory...**

**Step One...private meetings between your inside allies and those not approached yet...let “them” know you’re gonna win, and they may all join you!**

**Step Two ... press conference – with council proposal and local groups**

**Step Three ... letters and phone call campaign...**

**Step Four ... Close the Deal Quickly ... at City Council meeting the same night as the public hearing when you have your “troops” there to testify and bear witness.**

#### **Rules of the Road:**

- **Beware! Don’t get sucked into the “false economics” by your opponents!**
- **Stick with the high-ground vision...the People will join you. (Don’t mud wrestle...)**
- **Don’t let the lawyers disappear with your victory into the back room to write the “fine print” ... keep the whole process public**