



An inside guide to event recycling

With summer fast approaching, outdoors events, such as fairs, concerts and sports matches, are kicking into high gear. Provided are ways to improve recycling at these events.

By Henry Leineweber

Whether they're leaning back in the outfield bleachers with a cold beverage, trying something new at a food cart or packing into a crowded music venue, people inevitably generate waste wherever they are. Get a lot of people together in one place, and the volume of waste and recyclables produced adds up fast. That makes waste management and recycling at special events – from sports games, to music festivals, to county fairs, etc. – one of the most challenging behind-the-scenes jobs for any event coordinator. Whether you're targeting NASCAR fans or wine aficionados, if done right, these event attendees will participate and improve their attitude toward recycling. However, if done wrong, organizers may find themselves with a big mess on their hands.

Fortunately, there are many resources available for cities, organizations and planners looking to add a touch of green to their events. Despite vast differences in size, type, attendee demographics and geographic location, certain challenges are shared between different events. The experiences of many event recycling coordinators can also go a long way toward customizing your collection approach to meet your event's unique needs.

Laying the groundwork

"If you haven't got buy-in from the event organizers, just walk away," cautions Jake Wilson, executive director of Keep

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Mecklenburg Beautiful, a Keep America Beautiful affiliate group located in Charlotte, North Carolina. “There are some people that don’t see it as a priority; but, generally, if you bring it up early enough in the planning process, people will go for it.”

Wilson’s group successfully implemented a tailgate recycling program for its hometown National Football League franchise, the Carolina Panthers, operating at all home games during the 2009-10 season.

Thanks in part to a broad media outreach campaign, strategic partnerships with sponsors and agencies and smart use of volunteers, the recycling program was also expanded to other events in the Charlotte metro area. But, like any successful recycling event, Wilson’s work started long before the first tailgaters ever rolled into the parking lots at Bank of America Stadium.

Regardless of the event, be it sports or otherwise, preplanning for events recycling begins by listing the primary stakeholders and contacting their coordinators and event organizers. These might include concert promoters; venue owners; a local parks and recreation department, or municipal, authority; a volunteer or sponsoring organization; or even a sports franchise. In the case of Keep Mecklenburg Beautiful, relevant stakeholders identified at the outset of the program included the Carolina Panthers, the City of Charlotte and the owners of the parking lots around the stadium.

“Several parking lot companies own the space around the stadium. We brought them down to the stadium and sort of wine and dined them to get them on-board. Gave them t-shirts, souvenirs, that sort of thing,” said Wilson. “Some parking lot companies were more proactive than others – obviously their first priority is to make money; but, once you start making the environmental argument, and talking about the image associated with that, most people will get on board.”

Outreach during this phase in the planning process is essential. A 2008 report on planning event recycling developed by the National Association for PET Container Resources, titled *Venue Recycling in the USA*, stresses that:

Primary stakeholders need to be on board at an early enough point in the planning processes where employees, contractors and other personnel, directly under the control of the stakeholder group,

can understand their responsibilities for recycling and how their responsibilities relate to those of other stakeholders.

According to the report, “once commitment and accountability are established, the relationships among all the stakeholders will be very important and should be well understood, along with the functional responsibilities of individuals for specific tasks.”

Across the country in Portland, Oregon, event organizers for the Portland International Beer Festival – a three-day event that annually attracts more than 60,000 attendees – learned the importance of stakeholder outreach the hard way. The Beerfest takes place every year in Portland’s trendy, downtown-adjacent Pearl District, attracting over 150 craft brewers from around the world.

“In the beginning – 2001 to 2005 – we used Oregon’s bottle bill to handle recycling,” says Rick Carpenter, founder of the Portland International Beer Festival. “It was the coolest trickledown theory. Back then, we didn’t even have a recycling Dumpster, because all the homeless folks knew about the event. Literally, they would roll up every night with their shopping carts, we would load them up, and off they would go to the redemption center.”

But, pushback from local grocers and retailers forced Carpenter to find a new solution. The haphazard method of disposing of the large volume of glass through the homeless population not only negatively impacted the image of local businesses offering redemption services, but also provided ammunition to critics of Oregon’s bottle bill, too. In the end, Carpenter and the beerfest organizers were left scrambling for a hauling and recycling contract, with no partners and no sponsors.

“We used Waste Management the first year we used Dumpsters and ended up getting ripped off, in my opinion,” laments Carpenter. “We’re using Heiberg [Garbage and Recycling] now. We’re getting a better deal, but we’re still paying a lot of money.”

Collecting data before recyclables

The next phase of planning involves determining just what sorts of recyclables are likely to be generated at the event. An accurate assessment of what the waste stream for a given event is likely to consist of is extremely useful in determining what sort

of collection requirements will be needed.

The NAPCOR report has this to say on the topic:

Ideally, venue management and its food service contractors should provide complete beverage container sales data to allow accurate projection of volumes and weights of recyclables ... The venue/event’s policy on allowing outside beverages must also be articulated so that these containers can be accounted for as well. These additional containers may be significant in planning for recovery; in fact, some venues with generous outside beverage container policies have reported greater than 100-percent recovery numbers based on beverage sales, illustrating how an accurate accounting for these containers is important.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) guide to event recycling also references the importance of conducting a waste assessment. The EPA encourages the use of its volume-to-weight conversion chart (available on the agency’s Web site, www.epa.gov) to help coordinators decide which material streams to focus on. Gaining access to this type of data has been shown to aid coordinators in their negotiations with hauling and waste management firms.

However, a bit of common sense also helps determine what to expect from your event.

“The aluminum guys thought it was Christmas,” jokes Jake Wilson. “There was some glass, some plastic; but, not surprisingly, it was mostly Aluminum beer cans for our tailgaters. We averaged about three tons of recyclables per game.”

Once inside a stadium, the material stream changes slightly.

“We see a lot of water bottles as the temperatures start rising, some aluminum cans, and we now accept plastic cups,” says Mariano Reyes, community outreach specialist for the City of Mesa’s Solid Waste Management Department. Reyes runs the recycling program for Hohokam Park, the spring training home of the Chicago Cubs Major League Baseball (MLB) franchise. The stadium seats more than 12,500 and, in 2009, the team broke the all-time MLB spring training attendance record by drawing 203,105 fans.

Back in Portland, Rick Carpenter

faces a different set of recyclables. “Unlike most craft beer festivals, which are mainly keg beer, we have about 150 different beers – half of which are bottled. So, we have enormous amounts of glass recycling. There’s no aluminum and the only plastic that’s on site is in the form of the souvenir mugs people use.”

In all of these cases, the type of event has a major impact on the composition of the waste stream. Knowing what your event’s waste stream will be will allow for better negotiations with the contracted recycling and waste hauling firm.

Setting the stage

Once parties are on board and responsibilities have been established, secondary stakeholders and responsibilities can be identified. These can include recycling sponsors, volunteer groups and, if the primary stakeholders do not already have one contracted, a recycling and waste management firm.

Sponsors can, and often are, affiliated groups or organizations, but can also be local businesses. In the case of the latter, financial sponsorship of recycling for an event offers a chance to promote the local business. In many cases, bins or bags bearing a logo or message from the sponsoring firm are used for collection. In cases where it is not practical for collection bins to be distributed, some event recycling coordinators have successfully offered sponsorship messages on signage, souvenir merchandise, video displays, and other communication means.

For these coordinators, securing sponsorships offers a chance to offset some of the costs of recycling at their events. Regardless of the type of event, it is essential that recycling remains cost competitive versus simply processing all material as waste. Prohibitively expensive costs jeopardize the support of the primary stakeholders and the long-term viability of recycling at the event.

Volunteers can be recruited through a variety of means. Some sponsoring businesses may encourage their employees to participate, although this is the exception, rather than the rule. Other good sources of volunteers include local community centers, clubs, lodges, civic organizations, and other similar groups. Those that have organized similar community clean-up days will be able to draw on that same pool of volunteer organizations.

The one common tip offered by

several event recycling coordinators, relating to volunteers, involves compensation. Nearly all agreed that it was important to provide volunteers something for their time. If coordinators don’t have the budget to provide volunteers with a monetary stipend, other incentives are readily available in the form of free admission to the event, merchandise, photo opportunities and meet-and-greets (particularly effective for concerts or sports), and other event-related incentives that have a low financial impact on the success of the event itself.

Spreading the word

Few, if any, events can mandate recycling, meaning true collection success rests on the participation of attendees. Making recycling easy, and effectively communicating with attendees about the program, is essential in making sure people choose to recycle. Like most other elements that contribute to a successful event recycling program, knowing your target demographic will largely determine the method and intensity of media outreach and recycling education.

“We use a multi-pronged approach that follows the entire cycle of a patron’s festival experience. At the event, we reward patrons for picking up recycling through our hugely successful Rock & Recycle program; we have several Rock & Recycle booths throughout the park to encourage recycling; and we have an entire area devoted to greening called ‘Green Street,’ which features eco-friendly art market booths and engaging exhibits,” explains Jody Goode, associate producer for C3 Presents, organizers of the annual Lollapalooza music festival held in Chicago’s Grant Park. Featuring alternative, punk, rock and hip-hop acts, the festival caters to a younger demographic, which boasted 225,000 attendees over the course of the 2009 three-day concert.

“To get the word out, we utilize digital marketing and communication outlets like Web sites, mobile messaging and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter,” adds Goode. “We feel that using these platforms to broadcast information about the impact of our patrons’ environmental efforts has tremendous potential.”

Jake Wilson took a different approach: “Tailgate recycling for the Carolina Panthers was new, so we didn’t have any trouble getting media coverage. As the season went on, and the footprint grew, it was reported on almost weekly.” In this case,

because the recycling program was pegged to an important event for the local media market (coverage of the football team), coverage of the recycling program accompanied and supplemented an existing story.

Depending on the event, organizers may not need to do much outreach or promotion of the recycling program at all. If the demographics of an event include people who are already likely to recycle, then they already expect it and don’t particularly need much in the way of a refresher course. Wine and gourmet food tastings, or farmer’s markets, are good examples of these; but, it is a good idea for recycling coordinators to develop a demographic profile of their attendees during the planning process, in order to gauge what type of education campaign might be needed.

Once on site, attendees can be reminded of where and how to recycle through the use of bins that form a stark visual contrast to garbage collection. A bright color or an odd shape work well, as do clear streams, which allow passersby to visually see the differences between recyclables and wastes.

Mariano Reyes’ outreach program for the Cubs is extensive and has grown over the last couple of years to include posters around the park – including in all restrooms – regular public announcements, and placing recycling containers and signage by each refuse container around the park. The Arizona training stadium even launched a recycling awareness campaign with its own monkey mascot – “Recycling isn’t monkey business and I should know,” reads the simian’s t-shirt.

Elsewhere in pro baseball, Scott Jenkins, vice president of Ballpark Operations for the Seattle Mariners’ Safeco Field, has had a similar experience:

“Signage is really important,” said Jenkins. “The approach we’re taking is – they’re going to look for a place to discard something and we’re going to keep it real simple. If you have plastic, it’s going to go in our tall bottle shape container – and, it’s hard to put anything but a plastic bottle in that, so that stream stays really clean. The only other option is what they know to be garbage. But that’s going to become compost. So, the behavior of the guest doesn’t really have to change; that’s really the beauty of the system.”

“People don’t come to the game with their recycling cap on,” added Jenkins. “And, even if you’re a good recycler at home, when you walk into a sports venue, you, all of a sudden, forget about that.”

Collection successes

“We were expecting much more food contamination and polystyrene, but there really wasn’t much,” said Wilson on the quality of material collected. “Everyone had rather large reservations, but that changed after the first couple of loads to the MRF turned out to actually be very clean. In fact, they were cleaner than the residential stream we were used to. We were pleasantly surprised.”

Every game day, volunteers and parking lot owners would pass out yellow collection bags to each car. Tailgaters would then fill the bags with their empty containers and leave them by the curb when they walked to the stadium at game time. Containers were then collected by a truck going from lot to lot. By the end of the Carolina Panthers’ season, Wilson’s program had achieved a diversion rate of 30 percent and collected over 30 tons of beverage containers. Similar programs organized by Keep Mecklenburg Beautiful have been successfully implemented at other events in the Charlotte area, including being piloted at NASCAR’s Food Lion Speed Street 600 Festival – drawing an estimated 400,000 fans – where 3.5 tons of aluminum cans were collected in a single day. Altogether, event organizers stated that approximately five to seven tons of plastic bottles, aluminum cans and cardboard were collected.

Lollapalooza, which is expecting another banner year for attendance, is also banking on its strong recycling program. According to Jody Goode, the festival produces between 100 and 150 tons of waste each year, most of which is plastic water bottles, cardboard and wood. The festival generally recycles between 20 percent and 25 percent of all material generated and has set goals to steadily increase its diversion rate every year.

Goode says festival organizers have also taken steps to reduce the waste footprint of the colossal concert by encouraging the use of reusable water bottles, biodegradable bags and containers, and banning expanded polystyrene foam containers. Concertgoers will have access to over 400 specially marked recycling bins as well.

Back in Seattle, Safeco Field has seen

Event: Stadiums/arena sports

Waste stream: Magazines/paper products, food waste, plastic beverage containers

Tips: Locate recycling bins on each level near entrances/exits and concession areas; Remind attendees to recycle via video and public address announcements.

Event: Tailgate parties/ pre-game sport events

Waste stream: Aluminum cans, glass and plastic bottles

Tips: Take into account the intensity of the game. Preseason games attract fewer tailgaters than regular season games. Intense rivalries attract more.

Event: Food and beverage tastings/festivals

Waste stream: Glass bottles, paper plates and plastic flatware, food waste

Tips: Coordinate with vendors and volunteers to make sure recycling bins are available for each exhibiting brewer/

vineyard/restaurant; for attendees, visually distinguish recycling bins from waste disposal.

Event: Outdoor music festivals

Waste stream: Plastic water bottles, plastic bags, paper, food waste

Tips: Provide backstage pass for recycling volunteers to encourage quality and a large number of enthusiastic recruits; to reduce overall waste generated, promote the use of reusable water bottles and set up filling stations.

Event: Fairs/carnivals

Waste stream: Food waste, paper and plastic flatware

Tips: Organize several pre-event meetings with volunteers and all event staff to make sure everyone knows the location of bins and can assist with basic questions; Make sure bins can be easily distinguished from waste receptacles.

its diversion rate jump from 12 percent, in 2005, to 38 percent, in 2009, and program officials expect the rate to increase even higher with a switch to an almost completely compostable scrap stream.

The City of Seattle’s new food packaging requirements state that, as of July 1, 2010, “all food service businesses must use approved compostable products, recyclable plastic, or recyclable plastic-coated paper products for all one-time-use food service ware.” Operations at Safeco are getting ahead of the curve by moving to an entirely compostable line of service ware. In all but a few locations around the stadium, there will only be two options for Mariners fans – recycling or composting.

The non-recyclable and non-compostable portion of the waste stream is negligible, according to Jenkins. Wrappers from licorice rope, plastic chip bags, condiment wrappers, and other items, are handled by pickers cleaning up after the game, and by sorting at the composting facility.

Collection for Hohokam Park and the Chicago Cubs has proved successful as well. Volumes have gone up over the last couple of years, after starting the formal recycling program in 2007. “During the approximately month-long season in 2007, we collected 182 90-gallon containers,” said Mariano Reyes. “In 2008, we jumped

up to 218 [of the containers] and, last year, we collected 602 full 90-gallon containers.” Reyes attributes the jump in collection to the aforementioned outreach efforts, upgraded containers and signage.

Like organizers of residential, business or special collections already know, each recycling program is unique and specific to certain times, places and communities. Focusing on the challenges common to many event recycling programs, and learning from coordinators that have successfully met them, can go a long way in helping future planners focus on tailoring their recycling program to their event.

Although Reyes wouldn’t guarantee *Resource Recycling* a Cubs victory for 2010, he did guarantee the coming season would definitely “another successful recycling year.” **RR**

For Web sites providing useful information on how to put on a successful special events recycling program, see “Recycling in cyberspace” on page 56 of this month’s issue.

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Recycling in Cyberspace



Don't waste your next event

by Roger Guttentag

Henry Leineweber's article "An inside guide to event recycling," found on page 28 in this month's *Resource Recycling*, does a great job of discussing how to reduce the waste created by all types of special events, ranging from small community festivals to giant sport stadiums. Unlike a lot of topics I have dealt with, there has been a lot of good content published on the Web within the last five years addressing special event waste management. A recommended listing of these informational resources can be found at the end of this column. However, there is a lot of overlap between them. So, for the balance of this column, I will focus on recommending where you should go if there are specific tools or techniques you need to know more about.

General information sites

If you are unfamiliar with special event recycling, then the recommended starting points for your research should be the following sites:

- CalRecycle – Venues and events: Reducing Waste
- Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CTDEP) – Event recycling resources
- North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (NCDPPEA) – Event and venue recycling
- Recycle Together – *Venue Recycling in the USA* (NAPCOR report)

All these sites have links to how-to technical guides, as well as other resources that you will find extremely useful.

The most extensive technical reference available is the 2008 National Association for PET Container Resources (NAPCOR)

report *Venue Recycling in the USA*, which can be found on the Recycle Together site. It is oriented to beverage container recycling, but its findings can be applied to any type of venue-based waste reduction program. In particular, the report's analytical approach to venue recycling, by establishing seven distinct venue categories based on location (indoors or outdoors) and infrastructure (transient or permanent), is very helpful.

Another recommended resource is the *Special Events Best Practices Guide* published by the Stop Waste Partnership (Alameda County Waste Management Authority – California), which can be found as a link on many of the general reference sites listed above. It provides a well-organized, succinct overview of all the key issues affecting special event recycling, including a one-page suggested timeline that thoroughly summarizes the key planning milestones.

Case studies

Case studies are a great way of illustrating how theory can be put into practice, as well as highlighting innovations or potential pitfalls. The following sites provide case studies that accomplish these goals.

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – Special events
- Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) – *Special Events Recycling*
- Race to Recycle – Final report, City of Tampa (Florida), '07-'08
- Recycle Together – *Venue Recycling in the USA* (NAPCOR report)

Waste composition

One of the most important planning tasks to be undertaken, as part of a special events recycling program, is getting a handle on the wastes that can be recycled, composted or reduced through re-use. The references

Web Address Directory

CalRecycle – Venues and events: Reducing Waste

City of San Jose – Zero Waste Event Program

CTDEP - Special Events

Ecology Action – Special events recycling

Festival for the Eno – Trash Free Primer

GSA – *Waste Minimisation Guide: Events and Venues*

NERC – *Special Events Recycling*

NCDPPEA – Event and venue recycling

Race to Recycle – Final report, City of

Tampa (Florida), '07-'08

Recycle Together – *Venue Recycling in the USA*

SF Environment – Special events recycling

StopWaste.org – *Special Events Best Practices Guide*

CalRecycle – *Targeted Statewide Waste*

Characterization Study

EPA – Special events

Waste Awareness Wales – *Wales Event Recycling Guide*

www.calrecycle.ca.gov/Venues

<http://tinyurl.com/zerowasteevent>

<http://tinyurl.com/ctdepevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/easpecialevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/enofest>

<http://tinyurl.com/gsaevents>

www.nerc.org/tools

<http://tinyurl.com/p2paysevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/tampareport>

<http://tinyurl.com/napcorevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/sfeventsguide>

www.stopwaste.org

<http://tinyurl.com/calrecycleevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/epaevents>

<http://tinyurl.com/walesevents>

listed below can help you with this task, especially the CalRecycle report that includes a detailed discussion of venue-based waste composition. The NAPCOR report is another important resource since it will provide beverage container generation data by venue category.

- Recycle Together – *Venue Recycling in the USA* (NAPCOR report)
- Race to Recycle – Final report, City of Tampa (Florida), '07-'08
- CalRecycle – *Targeted Statewide Waste Characterization Study* (June 2006)

Composting

In general, special events generate food waste. It is for this reason that composting needs to be considered as one of the key strategies in an overall event waste reduction plan. One state that has aggressively promoted the composting of event-based organic waste is California, and it is not surprising that some of the best sources of information on this practice originate from the Golden State. The Cities of San Francisco and San Jose sites not only address how compostable wastes can be recovered from special events, but they also suggest how non-compostable products can be replaced by their compostable equivalents,

such as eating utensils, cups and plates.

- San Francisco Environment – Special events recycling
- City of San Jose – Zero Waste Event Program

Container listings

You can't recover what you don't collect. But, it is equally important to use the right containers for the right purpose. Both the Connecticut and North Carolina sites have online directories of container vendors, with information on container type, function, design and intended location, along with Web addresses and vendor contact data.

- CTDEP – Event recycling resources
- NCDPPEA – Event and venue recycling

International

I like to add some international references, since I believe it is helpful to see how other countries handle the same problems we have. Two non-U.S. based guides on event recycling that I found to be worth reviewing were created respectively by Waste Awareness Wales (U.K.) and Zero Waste South Australia.

- Government of South Australia (GSA) – *Waste Minimisation Guide: Events and Venues*
- Waste Awareness Wales – *Wales Event Recycling Guide*

Final thoughts

There is no question that successful special event waste reduction requires careful planning and the right tools and people to implement. However, one common element that all the technical guides agree on is that you need the endorsement of event organizers and participating vendors to make it work. Make sure you get those endorsements or your waste reduction goals will become uneventful.

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