Civic coordination

A survey of domestic recycling coordinators provides insight into the present and future state of municipal diversion efforts.

by Justin Gast

Approaching Lucy Lunchpail or Henry Homemaker on the street and asking their opinion of recycling would likely yield some interesting answers. Some might claim the current recycling process is confusing or disorganized, while others might affirm that, though the practice is evolving, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

Before you dismiss these opinions as the words of the unenlightened masses, it should be noted that these are actual sentiments from some of the most important people working in the recycling and composting industry: Municipal recycling coordinators.

Using U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Washington) statistics, combining the nation's most recent 32.5-percent municipal recycling rate with the fact that another 12.5 percent of recovered material is presently being incinerated at domestic combustion facilities leaves a whooping 55 percent of post-consumer material that still finds its way to landfill annually. So, how do we go about recovering that tonnage?

To get a better sense of where the recycling industry currently stands and what will need to occur down the road for the recycling and composting industries to prosper, *Resource Recycling* surveyed nearly 300 municipal recycling coordinators nationwide to get their thoughts, ideas and perspectives on the these issues and more. Populations served by those participating in the *2008 Municipal Recycling Coordinators Survey* ranged from localities with only 502 residents (Bethel, Minnesota) to metropolises with over 2.2 million residents (Houston).

Get to know your coordinator

Knowledge generally is obtained through education and experience, two attributes a majority of the coordinators surveyed possess.

Of those participating in *Resource Recycling's* survey, 47.6 percent had between one and 10 years of experience with their current municipal agency, while 46.1 percent had over a decade of service with the same organization. In addition, 21 percent had 15 plus years, and 6.5 percent had more years with their local government than New York City's had a curbside recycling program – loyally dedicating themselves to more than two decades of service with the same agency. On average, respondents reported holding their current coordinator's position for 15.9 years.

In regards to education, nearly 65 percent had at least a bachelor's degree, with 20 percent of the respondents also possessing either a master's or doctorate degree. Conversely, the survey revealed that 21.4 percent of the coordinators contacted oversee their community's recycling program holding nothing more than a high school diploma or a general education development certificate.

Education, experience and even the size of the community – in relation to a respective department's budget – are just some of the many factors that come into play when determining municipal recycling coordinators' annual salaries. As noted in Figure 1, though salaries ranged anywhere from $25,000 to over $85,000 per year, a majority of those surveyed (59.9 percent) fell between the salary range of $25,000 and $65,000, while almost half that (33.5 percent) earned an annual salary that exceeded $65,000. And, staying on the topic of annual green, 54.2 percent of the participants divulged that their salary had risen over the past two years, while 43.9 percent reported their annual salary as being stable.

Service with a smile

Single-stream. Dual-stream. Pay-as-you-throw (PAYT). Curbside. Drop-off. Recycling has come a long way over the years, and the recovery method for residential- and commercially-generated material depends, largely, on the locality being served.

For example, in more rural locations with limited program budgets, a drop-off program may be more feasible and cost-efficient then having material picked up on a weekly, bi-weekly, or even monthly, basis. Conversely, in larger communities and major metropolitan areas, where material volume is much greater, recycling coordinators have more program options to ponder, including curbside collection, drop-off or a combination of systems. Regardless of community and program size, though, recycling coordinators have a tremendous amount of decisions to make when managing a municipal system, including program approach (e.g., single or dual stream), container size, municipal or private program management, whether incentives

should be involved or if the diversion effort should be mandatory.

When questioned about the recycling and composting services being provided by their agency, as noted in Figure 2, 77.9 percent of respondents utilized a drop-off process for residential collection, while 70.9 percent reported using a curbside service for recovery of recyclables. Additionally, 60.2 percent have an established collection program for yard debris, while 7.8 percent also reported having a recovery program for other organic materials (e.g., food waste).

When asked about program approach, 50.8 percent of the coordinators surveyed said their community utilized a single-stream method, while the remaining 49.2 percent reported operating under a multi-sort approach. In regards to who was providing the desired collection service, 54.4 percent of the respondents said their programs were being operated by private crews, with another 23 percent stating that municipal crews handled all recovery duties. A combination method, with collection services being managed by both municipal and private parties, accounted for the remaining 22.6 percent.

Annual volumes among the surveyed communities ranged from between 30 tons, in Bethel, Minnesota, to 330,000 tons, in Alameda County, California. Curbside and drop-off programs both recovered a broad range of materials, from traditional residential and commercial recyclables (newspaper, mixed office paper, paperboard, aluminum cans and glass and polyethylene terephthalate containers) to more non-customary items, such as construction and demolition (C&D) debris, household hazardous waste and electronic waste.

With that, 65.1 percent of coordinators declared that collection volumes had risen in comparison to previous years, possibly due to successful promotional/educational efforts, program expansion or an increase in community size, while 22.6 percent stated that material volume remained stable. Only 12.3 percent reported collection volumes having fallen in their communities. Moreover, some respondents even said that they were unsure of just how much their respective programs were actually collecting on an annual basis, because material was being collected privately.

Most municipal coordinators readily proclaimed education and promotion as the single biggest cog in any prosperous residential or commercial collection program. Simplifying what "is" and "is not" recyclable for residents not only makes the process less cumbersome for the individual, but it also helps play a key role in minimizing material contamination from non-recyclables and increasing program volumes. In Portland, Oregon, for example, the modification of the Rose City's collection program included swapping residents' old yellow bins with newer 65-gallon roll-carts – yellow bins now are strictly for glass products, while the roll-carts are for all other materials. The new roll-carts include a sticker illustrating what recyclables can be placed in the container.

When questioned about the current state of the recycling industry, next to economics and markets, an overwhelming majority of participants declared a need for increased promotion and education to raise awareness and generate higher participation rates. The general consensus was that "it has got to be easy or people will not do it."

To promote diversion efforts in their communities, 89.4 percent of coordinators distribute leaflets or brochures, 81.2 percent promote or educate via word of mouth, while 80.8 percent publicize such efforts by e-mail messages or through Web sites. Other notable promotional endeavors employed by coordinators included community events (74.7 percent), free or paid newspaper advertising (68.2 percent), posters and signs (48.6 percent), direct mail (43.3 percent) and free or paid television advertising (32.2 percent).

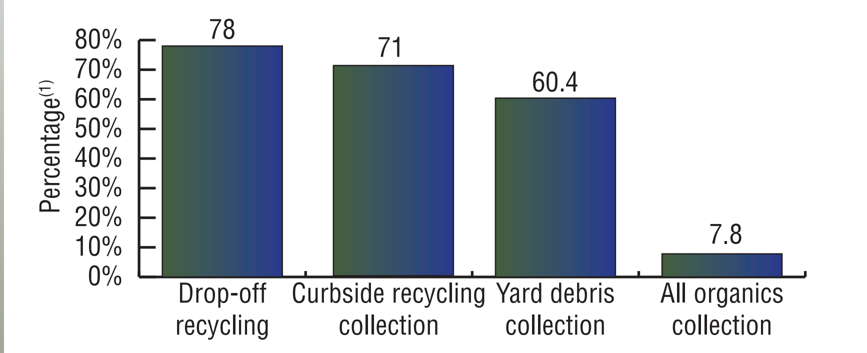
A matter of opinion

British historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle once penned, "Every new opinion, at its starting, is precisely in a minority of one." As part of this year's survey, *Resource Recycling* asked coordinators to share their opinions on such topics as the present challenges and barriers shaping their programs, new industry concepts, companies affecting the trade and the overall direction of the industry.

When participants were asked how they perceived the present state of recycling, 37.4 percent rated the venture as being "adequate," while another 33.5 percent described it as being "strong." The remaining 23.3 percent, however, labeled the present domestic diversion efforts as being "somewhat poor." As noted in Figure 3, numerous respondents acknowledged that the major issues contributing to their current perspective, as well as those affecting improved materials recovery by their program, included operational and capital funding, lack of state political will and rising fuel costs.

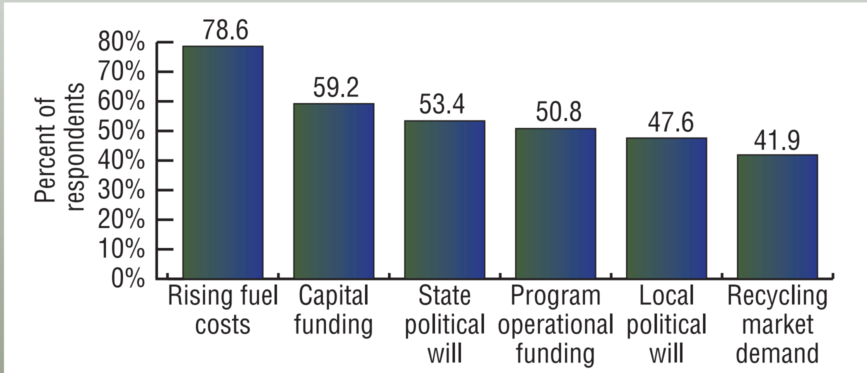
Furthermore, coordinators ranked the boosting of participation as being the top subject of interest, followed by new collection practices, C&D recovery, multi-family recycling and the lowering of program costs. On a countrywide scale, as noted in Figure 4, participants acknowledged consumer education, recycling market changes, political leadership, funding of governmental recycling

Figure 1 Collection programs offered by participating communities



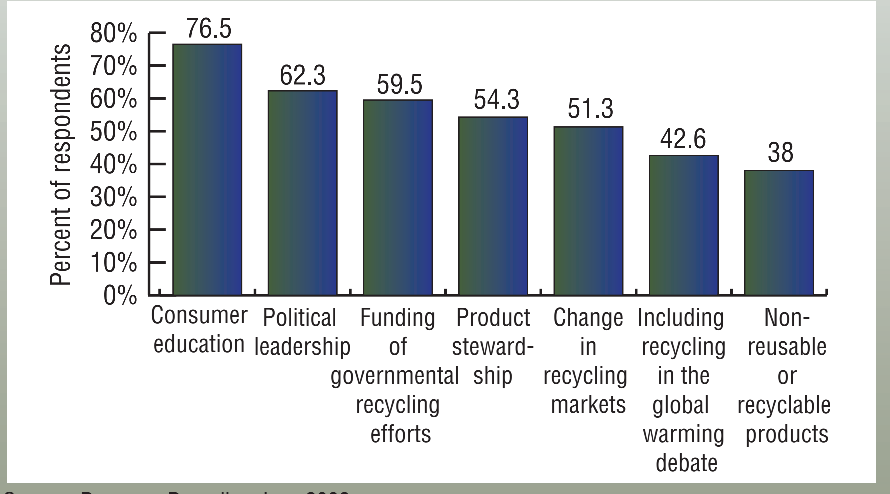
1. Percentages total more than 100 percent, as some programs offer multiple collection methods.
Source: Resource Recycling, Inc., 2008.

Figure 2 Barriers to improved material recovery



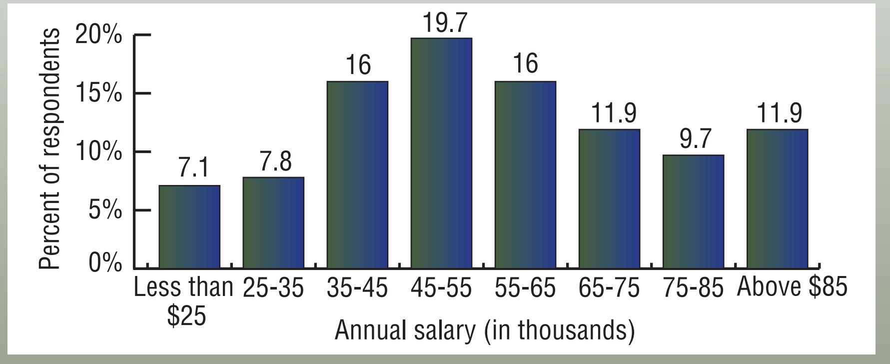
Source: Resource Recycling, Inc., 2008.

Figure 3 Critical issues for the future of materials recovered



Source: Resource Recycling, Inc., 2008.

Figure 4 Municipal recycling coordinator salaries



Source: Resource Recycling, Inc., 2008.

efforts and product stewardship as being major issues that would affect domestic materials recovery and waste reduction efforts over the course of the next year.

Industries do not operate without companies, thus, when asked about which firms respondents admired the most in terms of recycling, 17.3 percent thought highly of Waste Management (Houston), 6.3 percent admired Allied Waste Industries (Phoenix) and 5.5 percent were pleased with the undertakings of Eureka Recycling (Minneapolis). However, note that Waste Management (31.8 percent) and Allied Waste (12.1 percent), as well as Wal-Mart (Bentonville, Arkansas), receiving 6.1 percent of the total votes, also were rated by coordinators as being the least admired.

A similar question was posed regarding individuals' opinions about the organizations representing the recycling industry. Participants responded that their opinion of such organizations as the American Forest & Paper Association, the Aluminum Association, the National Recycling Coalition (all of Washington), the Steel Recycling Institute (Pittsburgh) and the Solid Waste Association of North America (Silver Spring, Maryland) were "mostly positive," with the NRC and SWANA being slightly more favored. Additionally, others were more "neutral" toward such trade associations as the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, Inc., the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers (both of Washington) and the American Chemistry Council (Arlington, Virginia). The ACC, however, also received the most votes of any of the organizations, in regards to negative opinions.

The future entails…

Growth, hope and opportunities. These were just a few of the many reactions received from recycling coordinators when asked about the future of recycling. Some respondents, ironically, claimed that much could be learned from Generation Y and Z, to ensure the future success of the environmental venture.

Today's youth, according to participants, are more energetic about recycling than their older counterparts, embracing the act of diversion at a much quicker pace and implementing programs from the collegiate to the elementary level almost daily. This could be due to the fact that many youth are new to the concept, and, with almost daily debates on climate change, this could be nothing more than a trend period.

What will be the key drivers or concepts progressing future diversion efforts? Answers ranged from China, education and single-stream to the development of newer conversion technologies, product stewardship and zero-waste initiatives.

In relation to concepts focused on product stewardship, manufacturers from many industries already have established, or are looking to implement, take-back programs for such products as carpet, fluorescent lighting, paint and mercury products. Additionally, with each legislative season, more and more state lawmakers continue to recognize the issues surrounding electronic waste, approving producer-responsibility measures to ensure the recovery of used and moribund consumer electronics. Looking at diversion-based concepts from a national perspective, we asked coordinators, "What concepts would you support if the new Congress was to tackle more recycling-based issues next year?" The results included:

- 87.5 percent stated they would support a national e-waste law based around producer responsibility, while 57.6 percent favored an e-waste program utilizing an advanced recovery fee approach
- 65.5 percent acknowledged they would support a national ban on the disposal of certain recyclables
- 64.8 percent would like to see a national beverage container deposit law
- 57 percent want the establishment of a law that requires states to meet a minimum municipal recycling rate

Another industry concept being discussed in many communities involves that of zero-waste initiatives. Touted by *Newsweek* magazine (New York) as one of the 10 fixes to save the planet, when coordinators were asked about their familiarity with the philosophy, 70 percent proclaimed themselves as being familiar with, or extremely knowledgeable about, the zero-waste concept, while 21.9 percent stated they are beginning to learn about the idea.

So, with all the technologies, program approaches and concepts available to the recycling and composting industries, does the U.S. have all the necessary means in place to increase that 32.5-percent municipal recycling rate to, say, 50 percent? By the end of this decade? Some answerers did not think to highly of the nation's ability to recycle, estimating that, by the end of 2010, the rate would nose-dive to a paltry 10 percent. Conversely, others must of thought we wanted their answer based on a "in a perfect world" scenario, as several coordinators stated the recycling rate would increase to 100 percent. I guess only time will tell. **RR**