WasteCap: A business-to-business recycling and waste reduction program

by Emily Hess and Tim Bishopbric

A commercial recycling effort that began in one small state has served as a model for similar projects in four other states.

What began as a modest business energy conservation program funded by government in one of the nation's least populous states has grown into a program tailored by the business community to the recycling and waste reduction needs of businesses in four states and one metropolitan area.

WasteCap, which was started in Vermont by a partnership between the state Agency of Natural Resources and the Associated Industries of Vermont as a service for any Vermont company, was patterned after a state energy conservation initiative for businesses. The WasteCap concept has since been adopted in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Lincoln, Nebraska, and most recently in Wisconsin.

Although start-up funding for WasteCaps have come from a variety of sources — city, state and federal agencies, chambers of commerce and businesses — most mature WasteCaps receive the lion’s share of their ongoing funding from the very groups that they serve — businesses.

Why are businesses so enthusiastic about supporting WasteCaps? In short, because the programs offer a nonregulatory, nongovernmental approach to waste reduction and recycling advice for businesses.

What is WasteCap?
WasteCap is a businesses-helping-businesses initiative that provides information on solid waste reduction to the private sector. “Businesses helping businesses” — it sounds good, but can it apply to the real world? Well, efforts in several communities around the country have demonstrated that it not only applies, but it thrives.

Through expanded WasteCap efforts, companies are sharing recycling information and learning from each other’s successes and failures. “Before I started working with WasteCap, my company had an effective waste reduction program. And now every time I go out and work with another company, I share my experiences and at the same time learn from other businesses’ expertise,” explains Doug DeVries, environmental manager for Hyde Manufacturing Company in Southbridge, Massachusetts.

Participating companies invest resources, time, people and information in WasteCap and the development of its programs. In return, they gather new ideas, information and contacts, while reducing waste streams and costs and, ultimately, improving the business community’s competitiveness.

“I was excited by WasteCap from the start. There was all sorts of pressure on the business community to reduce solid waste, and the business community responded with WasteCap. This program embodies the 1990s approach to environmental improvement, offering tangible solutions that simultaneously help the bottom line and the environment. This type of cooperative climate lends itself to the development of creative ideas — without the need for additional regulatory burdens,” explains Robert Ruddock, senior vice president for energy and environment programs at the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, a trade association for Massachusetts manufacturers. “WasteCap represents the business community’s commitment to the environment by saying yes to creative solutions.”

Exchanging information

The WasteCap projects around the country work to eliminate barriers to change by sharing information between business owners/operators. Although each WasteCap program varies, they do share common threads that contribute to their success in the business community:

■ Both the state government and the business community (through prominent trade groups) are committed to the program.
■ It is a public-private partnership (and in

Emily Hess is the executive director and Tim Bishopbric is the outreach manager for WasteCap of Massachusetts, located in Boston.
The services are implemented and controlled by a private organization, not a public agency.

A general goal is to link business people and share solutions.

WasteCap maintains confidentiality for companies taking advantage of the services.

Funds are raised from state grants and industry contributions (some programs also have local funding or support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency).

Services are open to all businesses.

There are no service or membership fees.

Success is defined by the waste prevention programs that companies implement.

Businesses helping businesses

The single most important element that makes WasteCap unique and separates it from other solid waste technical assistance programs is the business community's control. The program's success or failure reflects directly on the business community's commitment to voluntarily improving the state of the environment. "We got involved in developing WasteCap to respond to the business community's need for information, but it was not necessary to do this by creating more positions within the state government. We felt that a program working outside the Department of Environmental Protection would have tremendous potential," comments Robin Ingenthron, recycling director for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. "WasteCap is more than just talk — it's the business community's opportunity to act."

WasteCap programs address only non-hazardous solid waste management issues. Although many in the environmental field argue against single-medium approaches and for multi-medium initiatives, WasteCap supporters contend that the program succeeds because solid waste is one of the least regulated waste streams and it's a familiar place for companies to begin working together.

"Sharing information and ideas on solid waste is a comfortable place to start. The management systems that companies form to solve these issues, and the benefits companies realize, are foundations for other creative corporate programs for other materials and waste streams," says AIM's Ruddock.

WasteCap's "ownership" by the business community and its partnership with trade associations offers WasteCap an essential advantage over other technical assistance programs. In Massachusetts, several of the trade associations — which WasteCap considers to be partners — have told their members about WasteCap services and urged them to take advantage of the WasteCap programs. This gave WasteCap instant credibility with and access to literally hundreds of businesses and provided participating companies with a certain level of comfort when sharing information about their issues.

How it works

WasteCap follows a roll-up-your-sleeves approach to solving problems. The projects are designed to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas. The idea is not for WasteCap staff to have all the answers, but to bring together business people to share new ideas and perspectives on ways to successfully implement waste reduction and recycling efforts.

Businesses request WasteCap's services; WasteCap staff then choose the volunteer waste assessors who will best meet the needs of the business.

WasteCap's flagship program — the site visit — offers companies that want to begin or enhance their waste reduction programs the opportunity to learn from other companies. This is done by arranging for a team of volunteer waste assessors to visit the host company. The volunteers — professionals who work on waste reduction and recycling issues in their own companies — sign a confidentiality agreement before a site visit. In turn, the host companies sign a waiver and releases for the volunteers.

WasteCap offers waste assessors the option of taking a half-day training session, which focuses on developing communication skills so that the waste assessors can com-
Stop & Shop now recovers more

With its existing recycling efforts, the Stop & Shop Supermarket Company was already reducing its waste stream by 27 percent; but the company wanted to do even more. So it called in the experts from WasteCap.

A team of Massachusetts WasteCap volunteers visited Stop & Shop headquarters in Quincy and its distribution facility in Readville and provide a free, on-site waste assessment.

At the business’s distribution center, volunteer waste assessors suggested adding office paper, newspapers and magazines to the materials collected; recovering scrap wood; and gathering information on food waste recovery.

At the company’s headquarters, WasteCap volunteers suggested that adding old corrugated container and mixed office paper recycling, combined with improved employee education, could reduce Stop & Shop’s waste stream by an additional 25 percent. They will get out of it (and not just for the incentives in the volunteer network because of what companies consider it time well spent. Many companies encourage their employees to participate in the volunteer network because of what they can provide to host companies).

“I’ve been on several visits, and in some ways I feel guilty because I think I take away more ideas than I bring to the other company,” comments Hyde Manufacturing’s DeVries, a WasteCap volunteer.

Another WasteCap networking tool is the open house workshop. This is a “show and tell” by companies with successful waste reduction programs, model programs which others can learn from and emulate. Host companies expose their waste and recycling bins and explain their waste minimization programs.

WasteCap of Massachusetts held six such workshops over the past year to capacity crowds. “We enjoyed sharing our programs with other companies and actually picked up new ideas in the process. Preparing for the workshop, and then actually presenting the information, also reinforced with our employees the outstanding job they were doing, and it re-energized them to look for new opportunities,” says Stephen Greene, corporate environmental manager for Polaroid Corporation in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Spreading the good word

The WasteCap newsletter, called Business Recycle-Link, contains an assortment of stories about existing waste reduction programs. “The newsletter is a good resource to find out about programs at other companies. So many companies are doing similar things, but each has its own twist. The stories offer new ideas and insight, so I am working less in a vacuum and more in the overall business community effort,” observes Ken Teal, director of environmental issues for NYNEX Information Resources in Middleton, Massachusetts.

WasteCap site-visit team goes to college

Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts has an aggressive recycling program, but it still hosted a WasteCap team site visit in August to boost efficiency within the program. The team included four WasteCap volunteers and a WasteCap staffer. Two of the volunteers came from other universities and two came from the business sector.

Here are a few ideas the team came up with:

- Ways to reduce handling costs of mixed container recycling in food service areas.
- How to increase recovery rates by simplifying recycling collection systems in an administrative building.
- Increasing recovery rates in student housing by running dorm recycling competitions and generating support from the university’s environmental clubs.

communicate what they know to the companies that need the information. Waste assessors try to emphasize source reduction and packaging reduction first, but waste assessors typically recommend that businesses implement the simple and easy recycling and waste reduction steps first, and then go on to the more difficult tasks. About 75 waste assessors are currently active in Massachusetts’ WasteCap program.

Representatives from the host company and the volunteer team, which includes a WasteCap staffer, spend three or four hours together touring the facility, reviewing the company’s operations, brainstorming ideas and sharing experiences dealing with solid waste. After the site visit, WasteCap prepares a report outlining the suggestions and providing contact information; it is a confidential document and becomes the property of the host company.

The primary benefits of the site visit are the contacts and networks created among the volunteer team members and the host company. “The volunteers gave me new contacts and helpful information. They saved me a lot of leg work,” remarks Susan Stott, director of business services at Phillips Academy, a private school in Andover, Massachusetts, which hosted a pilot site visit.

WasteCap relies on business volunteers who donate their time for site visits, and although this means time away from the plant floor or office, the volunteers and their companies consider it time well spent. Many companies encourage their employees to participate in the volunteer network because of what they will get out of it (and not just for the insights they can provide to host companies).
Race-to-Recycle is a partnership among the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Building Owners and Managers Association and WasteCap of Massachusetts. “As the demand for office paper picked up, we had to look for opportunities to increase recovery rates. The Race-to-Recycle is a creative, positive tool to boost those rates. It was born in a focus group meeting on office building recycling. At our request, WasteCap brought together building managers, janitorial service providers and recycling companies, and during the discussion the idea for a competition emerged,” explained DEP’s Ingenthorn. “As the details came into place, the idea of a friendly competition among office buildings seemed more and more appropriate.”

The organizers are ideal partners: BOMA offered credibility and a link to the management companies, DEP provided state endorsement and resources, and WasteCap provided leg work and expertise. “The Race is exciting and offers real benefits to our members. Many of them are already doing an excellent job with recycling, and the race allows us, and the public, to recognize their efforts in a positive way. Linking with DEP and WasteCap gave us the solid waste expertise and state endorsement that makes the project a success,” states Carolyn Sidor, BOMA’s managing director.

Stepping forward
By the end of its first year of service to Massachusetts companies and institutions, WasteCap had conducted site visits and open house workshops, trained volunteers and provided over-the-phone technical assistance. In addition, it began efforts to stimulate the supply of recovered paper and the demand for recycled products. Given the nonregulatory nature of the organization, the success of the program is measured more in anecdotal stories than in hard facts and figures (see box).

The most important ingredient for a successful WasteCap initiative is the commitment and involvement of the business community. If the private sector perceives WasteCap as beneficial, then the other elements that are essential for the success of this type of program will fall into place.

“In Massachusetts, there were several organizations interested in offering the WasteCap services. We all agreed that a private, nonprofit [organization] was the best structure,” affirms Ruddock of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, reflecting on his involvement in creating the Massachusetts program. “Most importantly, it provided companies the security to share ideas and information and enhanced our ability to raise money.”

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