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Product Stewardship – Whose Responsibility is It?

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As of September 1, 2008, Texas law requires that computer manufacturers offer free and convenient recycling options for their equipment sold in Texas. With this bold step Texas became one of the first few states to enact a process that takes the burden of managing a difficult-to-handle waste off of local municipal solid waste programs and places this responsibility on the manufacturer. This kind of producer take-back legislation is part of movement called "product stewardship".

The purpose of product stewardship is to shift solid waste management from systems that focus solely on government-funded, ratepayer-financed waste diversion to ones that also require producer responsibility, reducing public costs and driving improvements in product design that promote environmental sustainability.

As the City of Fort Worth's solid waste manager, I am convinced that local governments need to support product stewardship initiatives and legislation. There are clear reasons why.

Over a century ago municipal governments recognized the need to establish municipal waste collection and disposal systems in response to a public sanitation crisis. However, since that time the complexity, toxicity and simply the shear volume of waste that individual households dispose has changed dramatically. We have moved from a society that disposed of mostly ash from heating and cooking, some putrescible wastes from food and garden scraps, and a very small amount of simple manufactured products to one that discards huge amounts of "disposable" products and product packaging. Today, no-longer-wanted manufactured products and packaging make up 75 percent of what Americans throw away. The purpose of municipal solid waste programs has shifted from one focused on public health to providing a convenient way to get rid of stuff we no longer want.

In addition, the toxicity of many products is a mounting worry. There are many common household products that when used in the home do not raise environmental concerns, but which do contain potentially harmful chemicals or substances. Examples include electronics (computers, televisions), fluorescent light bulbs, batteries, paints and varnishes, pharmaceuticals, and household chemicals. These and many other similar items make our lives easier and more enjoyable. However, when our residents no longer want these items and choose to dispose of them, our solid waste managers are presented with a challenge.

For safety and environmental protection, the disposition of these items should be handled outside the normal municipal solid waste stream of hauling them to a landfill. Many cities, like Fort Worth, operate a Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) collection facility. Other cities choose to partner with an established HHW collection center to provide this service to their residents. Handling and disposal costs for these wastes can be astronomical. This year's budget for Fort Worth's HHW collection center is over $1,005,000.00. The cost for the safe handling and disposition of the 2,577,000 pounds of HHW projected to be handled this year —material that is brought to the facility or to collection events by residents—is $780 per ton. Contrast this with the $166/ton it costs Fort Worth for weekly collection, transport and disposal or processing of our normal citywide curbside collection of garbage, recycling, yard waste and bulk waste (this cost also includes other administrative and operations functions such as call center operations, contract monitoring, non-hazardous drop-off station operations and illegal dump collections among others). The difference between $780/ton and $166/ton is mind numbing. And we firmly believe that Fort Worth has a cost effective HHW program!

The problem is that the manufacture of products is disconnected from disposal. Two separate systems are operating concurrently; one system designs, manufactures and sells products, then after the sale effectively closes the door. Once the consumer is finished with those products, the other system is engaged when local governments become financially responsible for managing disposal of these products—all of which are disposable by design, and many of which are toxic.

These two systems do not communicate with each other. Local governments don't have any input into how toxic or durable the products are, and manufacturers don't have to worry about creating safe methods to dispose of products at the end of their use. Product stewardship seeks to change this by encouraging manufacturers to redesign products with fewer toxins as well as to make them more durable, reusable, and recyclable, and made with recycled materials.

The Texas Product Stewardship Council, currently forming, will be a non-profit organization made up of local governments throughout Texas. It will be working towards Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies in Texas. EPR policies extend the responsibility and economics of product end-of-life management to the manufacturers. The goal is to provide the incentive for manufacturers to design products for the environment.

We are at the beginning of a turning point in how local governments handle many waste streams. It is not because we want to, but it is because we have to do so. Local governments can not continue to shoulder these disposal costs alone.

http://www.nctcog.org/envir/features/2008/dec/regvoice.asp