



# Northern News

NORTHERN SECTION, CALIFORNIA CHAPTER, AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

## Recycling: Point-Counterpoint

By Eric Fonstein

JANUARY 1999

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DUNCAN B. JONES

Since the original Earth Day in 1970, recycling programs have evolved from a counter-cultural expression of personal transformation and environmental consciousness-raising to become one of the more popular services offered by local governments. Now, after almost 30 years, recycling programs have matured enough for critical reassessment. As local governments face increasingly difficult fiscal decisions, recycling programs need to be held accountable as public policy; in short, do such programs make economic and environmental sense?

Judd Alexander's book, *In Defense of Garbage* (Praeger Publishers, 1993, 239 pages), is provocative reading if for no other reason than it presents an in-depth, anti-recycling

perspective rarely expressed so clearly in trade journals or academic literature. Since the book's publication, some of his basic arguments have been repeated in the mainstream press, most notably by Jeff

Bailey in the *Wall Street Journal* and by John Tierney in his controversial *New York Times Magazine* cover story "Recycling is Garbage."

### In Defense of Garbage

First, Alexander, like many others, faults environmentalists for their proclivity toward histrionic, doomsday-type assessments. In particular, he thinks that the public needlessly fears a "garbage crisis," which he considers "more political than it is physical."

Instead of "runaway" waste stream growth, Alexander, a former Executive Vice President for American Can Company, considers the real problem to be the constriction of options governments cause when they close landfills and "[fail] to provide replacement sites or alternative ways to handle the discards of

towns and cities." Since 1978, forty percent of the nation's landfills have closed and forty percent of those remaining sites will reach capacity by the year 2000.

Second, Alexander states that environmentalists have oversold the promise of recycling, creating unrealistic public expectations, particularly for curbside recycling programs that are dependent upon mass voluntary public participation. Indeed, most of Alexander's complaints are directed at curbside recycling, which he claims is less efficient and cost-effective than salvaging commercial and industrial scraps. (Business recycling offers greater economies of scale with a more homogeneous waste stream and a higher quality of materials.) Curbside recycling requires huge new fleets of collection trucks that add to traffic congestion and pollution. Moreover, he says landfill space is both plentiful and extremely cheap with low tipping fees, thus making municipal recycling programs appear comparatively expensive.

Alexander concludes by returning to the politics of siting landfills. According to Alexander, the real "garbage crisis" is the rise of NIMBYism that interferes with the siting of new facilities. Interestingly, he recommends "use payments," which in essence would pay communities to import waste.

### An Old, Misguided Approach

It seems, though, that use payments would tip his balance sheets and increase the cost of landfilling relative to other solid waste management strategies like recycling. Alexander's economic analysis is in fact distorted by artificially low tipping fees that do not reflect the real costs of siting, opening, operating and closing an urban landfill. Alexander and the critics are basically correct when they state that the "landfill crisis"

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## DIRECTORS CORNER

by Wendy Cosin

This year's APA Holiday Party was one of the best. The atmosphere was casual, people seemed to have a good time, and new people indicated interest in getting more involved with the Section. Not only was the food good, there was more than enough! Roberta Mundie and Marge Macris decked out and won first and second place in the Retro Costume Contest. The male winners, Grant Wilson and Steve Padovan, convincingly pulled off a beatnik look. The Section has always lost money at holiday parties in the past so this year we sold raffle tickets for donated baskets of chocolate and other goodies to help us break even. It worked. For the first time, we made money. At our next Board meeting we will select a deserving organization to receive our bounty. Thanks to party chair, Andrea Ouse, and many people who helped out including Greg Mattson, Hing Wong, Steve Noack, and others. This is the time to start planning next year's event — will the next party chair please come forward?

Our annual retreat is coming up at the end of January. At our last couple of retreats we have focused on direction, goals, and priorities. This year, we need to focus on implementation and non-Board members are welcome to attend. One of the main things we have to figure out is what Board members want and how to provide the services needed. The retreat is planned for Saturday, January 30. If you would like to attend, call any of the Board members for more information.

The main thing that we hear that members want is more events. Several years ago, we used the retreat to plan an entire year of events. If we can do this again this year we can provide members with a regular schedule in advance. What would help make this happen would be for a few of you to call a Board member before the retreat and offer to take the lead on an event. We will help you with finding a location, publicity, etc. Events can be after work mixers or lunch or dinner time get togethers. What we need is more people who will take the responsibility just one time this year to propose a topic, line up a speaker, and follow through to make sure it happens. This is your chance to share a pet topic with other APA members.

I'm very pleased to pass the Director's Column and the associated responsibilities to Mark Rhoades. Mark has previously served as the newsletter editor, communications director, and director-pro-tem. I would also like to welcome Margaret Kavanaugh-Lynch to the Board as the new Administration Director. Thanks to all of the Board members who have volunteered their time during the past few years and I hope to see more new people get involved this year. A healthy and peaceful new year to everyone.



## NEWSLETTER INFORMATION

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The deadline for submitting materials for inclusion in the **Northern News** is the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the month prior to publication.



## CEQA Workshops, Spring 1999

The Association of Environmental Professionals has announced the schedule for CEQA Workshops for Spring 1999:

Tuesday, February 23	Irvine (UCI Student Center)
Wednesday, February 24	Sacramento Convention Center
Thursday, February 25	Fresno City Hall
Friday, February 26	San Luis Obispo, City/County Library
Wednesday, March 3	Riverside City Operations Center
Thursday, March 4	Oakland, Association of Bay Area Governments
Friday, March 5	San Diego (site to be announced)

Each workshop will begin at 8:00 a.m., and conclude at 1:00 p.m. The focus will be on CEQA and CESA amendments and CEQA legislation.

For registration information, call (916) 737-2371.



## 1999 Section Awards Program

When making your New Year's resolutions, don't forget to consider submitting one of your projects or programs for a Northern Section award. Application materials will be available in January and the deadline for submittal will be April 9<sup>th</sup>. If you have questions call Wayne Goldberg at 707/543-3220 or watch next month's Northern News for more details.

**NSSCAPA** thanks the following sponsors for the generous donations made to the Holiday Party 1998:

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## Update on New APA Policy Guides

At the September APA and AICP leadership retreat in Indianapolis, the Legislative and Policy Committee of APA held a legislative forum to discuss three new policy guide topics which were chosen by the APA Board of Directors in April as legislative priorities for 1998—(1) farmland protection, (2) endangered species, and (3) sustainable development. A fourth draft policy guide on housing (dated 1/16/98) is being rewritten to address concerns raised at the 1998 national conference in Boston. Policy guide drafting is being undertaken by four task forces appointed by the Legislative and Policy Committee.

Early drafts of the housing (1/98), farmland protection (9/98), and sustainable development (9/98) are on the APA web site [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org) under Legislative and Policy Issues, National Legislative Affairs, Policy Guides in Progress. After the four draft policy guides are approved by the

Legislative and Policy Committee, they will be sent on January 8<sup>th</sup> to Chapter Presidents, Legislative Liaisons, and Division Chairs for their comments. These four drafts will also be put on the APA web site on January 8<sup>th</sup>.

March 12, 1999 is the deadline for Chapters and Divisions to provide comments on the draft policy guides. In addition, it is the deadline for Chapters to provide the Committee with the names of persons who will serve on the Chapter Delegate Assembly. The policy guides will be taken up by the Chapter Delegate Assembly at the national conference in Seattle on April 26, 1999, with the APA Board meeting the next day to ratify those policy guides approved by the Chapter Delegate Assembly.

For further information on the draft policy guides, please call or email George Colyer, Government Affairs Coordinator, at (202) 872-0611 or [gcolyer@planning.org](mailto:gcolyer@planning.org).



The Bulletin Board section of the Northern News is intended to provide a forum for individuals to provide the membership with information about events or current topics. If you would like to submit an item for the Bulletin Board section, contact the Newsletter Editor at (510) 642-3258.

## Recycling... *(continued from page 1)*

is less about the availability of land and more about economics and political pressure to maintain open space. While open landfill space may be plentiful, Alexander largely ignores location considerations and full cost analysis of landfill fees (including closure) that are necessary to help decision-makers determine the appropriate policy choice. As people continue to build in once-rural areas close to landfills, the now-urban landfills become an undesirable land use to their newly arrived neighbors.

In economic terms, the siting of landfills near urban areas results in general public benefit at the expense of localized costs (decreasing property values, increased traffic, etc.) Contrast, recycling programs as a solid waste management tool try to achieve a Pareto improvement, moving beyond the trade-off between decreasing one person's welfare for another's gain: recycling mitigates localized costs borne by residents who live near urban landfills.

While curbside recycling in and of itself may not prove to be cost-competitive with landfill disposal, curbside is a part of a larger set of waste management strategies. Curbside recycling has built-in costs like other municipal programs: recycling does not pay for itself; for that matter, neither do policing nor fire-fighting.

A rational, sensibly designed integrated solid waste management system cannot rely on a single method, but must include a variety of approaches for different elements in the waste stream. Therefore, analyzing curbside recycling as a stand-alone system, separated from its larger policy framework, may produce the distorted and myopic assessment found in *In Defense of Garbage*.

While offering a sharp and sometimes refreshing critique of recycling orthodoxy, Alexander holds to an antiquated, linear economic logic—a one way “cradle-to-grave” production line in which things created are eventually discarded. This ap-

proach readily orients solutions towards the end-of-the-pipe (landfill siting, clean up and pollution-control) rather than to the cyclical materials processes that are inherently part of the answer.

### The Restorative Economy

Paul Hawken, in his book *The Ecology of Commerce* (Harper Business, 1993, 240 pages), offers an alternative “cradle-to-cradle” materials use model. Waste and its disposal are external costs to production, costs currently borne by the end users and the general public. Hawken wishes to internalize these costs by shifting the responsibility and accountability to the producers of waste in what he calls a “restorative economy.” “By placing both the responsibility and the cost of mitigation with the originator of the problem,” Hawken writes, “vast and compelling incentives are created for companies to redesign, even reimagine, their business processes.”

The restorative economy model implies strong local and regional planning to establish the appropriate feedback systems—cost signals and incentives—to give businesses the information and certainty in the marketplace to close the loop within the production process. Hawken's approach consequently reduces the need for tailpipe solutions and the reliance on financially burdensome recycling programs.

Not surprisingly, Hawken offers his own critique of recycling programs, claiming that they are “woefully inadequate.”

Hawken agrees with Alexander that recycling programs “burden municipalities with their high costs.” Also, Hawken would probably agree with Alexander that residential recycling only addresses a minor segment of the waste stream. Hawken claims, “If the items used in households in America were all recycled, this would reduce our solid waste by only 1 to 2 percent.”

However, unlike Alexander, Hawken considers that it is the *producers* who should

*(continued on next page)*

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Resume, cover letter, three work-related references and current salary to: Shannon Associates, 1601 Response Road, Suite 390, Sacramento, CA 95815. (916) 567-4280. Fax (916) 567-1220. Email resumes@shannonassoc.com

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Resume, cover letter, current salary, and three work-related references by Friday, February 6, 1999, to Shannon Associates, 1601 Response Road, Suite 390, Sacramento, CA 95815. (916) 567-4280. Fax (916) 567-1220. Email resumes@shannonassoc.com

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**Recycling...**

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absorb these costs. "Only when the incentives to continue the manufacture of waste are removed, and only when the risks and costs far out weigh the gains and profits, will designers, engineers, chemists, and investors turn their attention to safer alternatives."

**Conclusion**

Recycling is only part of the solid waste management policy mix. Recycling depends upon the sustained broad-based and voluntary participation of local residents and businesses. Without continued reassurances of its propriety and persuasive messages to prompt and reinforce public participation, recycling diversion rates are likely to drop.

These books remind us to reexamine our assumptions. Solid waste management programs need to be fiscally responsible and sensibly designed, targeting specific waste streams, and to be reinforced with strong local planning and supporting regulatory structure (such as recycling and scavenging ordinances and adjusted tipping fees). Finally, program methods and goals must be communicated effectively to the public.

*Eric Fonstein is senior executive at PS Enterprises, an environmental, public affairs consulting firm.*

# Car Sharing Starting in San Francisco

Is your car eating up all your extra spending money? Wondering what you can do to help reduce pollution? A diverse group of San Franciscans have come up with one solution: car sharing.

City Car Share is a local non-profit organization of diverse individuals, united by a commitment to a rational, environmentally sustainable transportation system. Instead of owning private cars, car-sharers buy into a shared fleet of vehicles, which provide members with access to cars (or trucks) when needed. When a member needs to drive, (s)he calls a reservation line to "check out" a vehicle (within a five minute walk from their home), and a bill arrives at the end of each month with a time and mileage charge.

Car-sharing has emerged across Western Europe as an important component of the urban transportation network. It is a practical way to wean people from their over-dependence on cars, and leads to fewer cars in the city, thereby potentially freeing up urban space for more environmentally-friendly uses.

San Francisco City Car Share is currently being organized, and plans to officially open in mid-1999. For more information, or to join a working group, make a donation, organize a car-sharing pod, donate a parking space, or simply to get on the mailing list, contact Kate White or Elizabeth Sullivan, City Car Share, PO Box 420442, San Francisco, CA 94142; (415) 285-5842; e-mail: [k\\_white@urbanecology.org](mailto:k_white@urbanecology.org)

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- 23 AICP Exam Preparation Workshop, UC Extension  
(First of four classes) (510)642-4111
- 30 NSCCAPA Annual Retreat  
(Call a Board member for details)

JANUARY						
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3	4	5	6	7	8	9
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24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

**February**

- 23-26 CEQA Workshops, various locations  
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FEBRUARY						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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**Northern News**

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