

It may be time to toss old ideas on recycling

By Greg Barrett
Gannett News Service

LEESBURG, Va. — The thought that J. Winston Porter does not recycle his household plastic might seem blasphemous for the man whose legacy is staked to curbside recycling. Even the act of using a foam coffee cup, which he sips from at this moment, appears odd, but no more so than his ambivalence toward its disposal.

Will he recycle it?

"Only if it's convenient," he says without embarrassment or apology.

But the most curious revelation from this former Environmental Protection Agency official, the brain behind a 1988 EPA effort to jump-start America's recycling movement, is this: The disposable cup in his grip is probably friendlier toward the environment than the reusable porcelain mug that gets washed and rinsed over and over.

"Hot soapy water is a form of pollution, and you have to generate the energy somewhere," he says.

Since 1987, when a New York garbage barge drew the attention of the news media as it foundered in the Atlantic with nowhere to dock, some experts say America's so-called trash crisis has been mixed with rubbish. Most pronounced has been the belief that the nation is running out of landfill space. Even Porter, who less than a year after the barge incident told a concerned nation that it could and should ratchet up its recycling rate, admits to being initially fooled.

"I probably bought into it more than I should have," he says. "It turned out we didn't have a landfill crisis, except in the sense that we are not going to be building many more in New York and New Jersey. Land there is very expensive and it is spoken for."

Recycling boom levels off

By most accounts, it is good that the nation today is recycling 28% of its municipal solid waste, up from the 10% it was recycling when Porter rallied the nation. According to recycling statistics to be published this summer by the EPA, the USA converted 64 million tons of its 230 million tons of trash in 1999 (the most recent EPA data analyzed) into compost, glass bottles, newsprint, aluminum cans and the like.

The EPA aims for a 35% solid waste recycling rate by 2005, but says 32% is more realistic. What began as a boom in the late 1980s has leveled off, now that curbside recycling boxes are nearly as common as flower boxes and the easy stuff — newspapers, cans, milk jugs — already are being pruned from the garbage.

"America goes through fits and starts with this," says Jerry Taylor, director of natural resource studies for Washington's Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank. "Recycling was a religion that came and went. People still do it and feel a sense of personal worth for it, but as an issue of transcendent statement of environmental virtue, I don't think it is as important as it used to be."

The 35% goal is about the best America can — or should — aspire to, says Steven Levy, an environmental engineer for the EPA's Office of Solid Waste. "Once you go beyond the 35%, the amount of physical labor, transportation, separation and cleaning gets to be too costly," he says.

Yet many states are far more ambitious. Fourteen have goals of 50% or more, including Rhode Island (70%) and New Jersey (65%). Some environmental groups, such as the Grass-Roots Recycling Network based in Georgia, advocate "zero waste," a thorough redefining of the term trash.

"For a lot of environmentalists, the manufacturing of stuff is a problematic thing, but recycling is just manufacturing in reverse," Taylor says. "Instead of taking the constituent parts and manufacturing them to produce a widget, you are breaking them up to produce a widget — and oftentimes it is just as energy intense as the original process."

Hence the destiny of Porter's foam coffee cup, which, when it's buried in a "safe landfill" — a redundancy with today's strict EPA regulations — is relatively benign, he says. The fact that polystyrene foam products do not easily biodegrade is all the better. If the leaching of a landfill does occur, the coffee cup will stay put.

"If this foam cup ... sits in a landfill peacefully, it is not going to kill anybody," Porter says.

GrassRoots Recycling Network co-founder Bill Sheehan believes today's "safe landfill" is tomorrow's headache. No matter how safe the synthetic liners, groundwater monitor-



It's working: Curbside recycling has grown from a few hundred programs nationwide to more than 7,000.

ing systems, leachate collection and methane control, landfills will be somebody's problem.

"They will leak, eventually. It may be decades or, as some people say, centuries, but just because we won't have to deal with it doesn't mean our grandchildren or our great-grandchildren won't," says Sheehan, who argues that recycling is no more expensive than building landfills and using virgin materials. "If progressive communities sat around listening to dinosaurs like Winston Porter, places like San Francisco wouldn't have a 46% recycling rate."

Focus on other environmental problems

Porter long ago quit trucking (a green Ford Ranger with George W. Bush bumper sticker) his milk jugs 20 miles round-trip to a recycling center in Lovettsville, Va. The two or three pounds of plastic did not justify the gas emissions.

"I am not against recycling at all. I am against crazy recycling," says Porter, 63, founder and president of the Waste Policy Center, an environmental consulting firm here. "I'm not trying to ruin the tooth fairy here or anything, but, truth is, recycling involves some processes and some transportation and it creates some pollution."

That infamous Long Island barge named Mobro, which started it all, was more about a bungled business venture than the burden of trash, but it became an icon for America's disposable culture. Whether perception or reality, this was probably a good thing, Porter says. What began as an environmental movement morphed into a political one, and federal regulations today have made landfills safer and more remote than ever.

Also, in the years immediately following the Mobro, curbside recycling grew from a few hundred programs nationwide to more than 7,000, reaching about 50% of the population.

That is all good and needed, Porter says, but now let's focus on other environmental problems.

"I'm more concerned, for example, about the water and sewer lines in the big cities, some of which are 100 years old. If you get some cross-connection or leakage between sewer lines and water lines, you've got a real problem on your hands," he says. "If I had some extra money, I don't think I'd necessarily spend it on going from 28% recycling to 38% or 48%. I would say let's look at another environmental problem, such as infrastructure."

And with that, he threw his cup in the trash.

Nation

NYC pours hopes and dreams into landfill

City planners seek best use for Fresh Kills

By Rick Hampson
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Fresh Kills was the world's largest municipal garbage dump, so huge astronauts could see it, so putrid they could almost smell it.

But the city finally closed its last landfill. And Staten Island — the landfill's grudging host for 53 years — is left holding something besides its nose: a piece of property nearly three times the size of Central Park.

In a city where office space rents for up to \$100 a square foot per month and citizens routinely battle over the smallest pocket parks, "2,500 acres of public land with no specific claim on it is extraordinary," says Brendan Sexton, former city sanitation commissioner and a Staten Island resident. "This opportunity won't come again."

It hasn't really arrived yet. The last trash was dumped there only three months ago, and reclaiming the landfill for other uses will take years. But that's not stopping the dreamers.

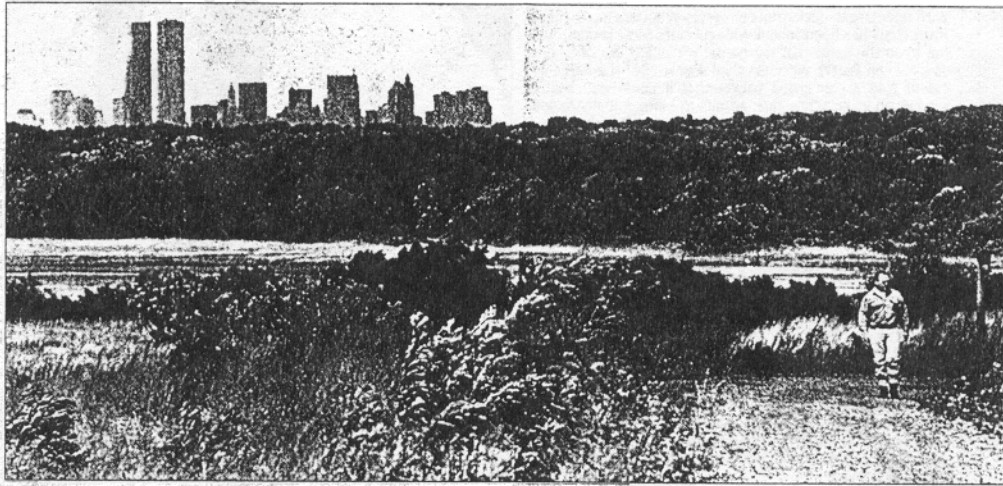
Mayor Rudy Giuliani wants a golf course. Parks Commissioner Henry Stern suggests "a Garden of Eden — a natural wilderness." Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari proposes improving the roads that trucks used through the dump and opening them to local traffic.

Fresh Kills is so big that there's room for all this and more. The city has announced an international competition to design a master plan, and all sorts of ideas are floating around. They range from the eccentric (a prison for cellphone abusers and a trash-themed amusement park called "Wasteland") to the obvious (ball fields and nature trails).

The site's fate will be determined by the city's famously contentious planning process. Everyone from the neighbors to the mayor will get a say. The stakes are high. "We want not just something ordinary or satisfactory," Planning Commissioner Joseph Rose says. "We want something exciting."

Fresh Kills will be the largest example of new open space coming from an old garbage dump:

- Boston covered a landfill in



"You won't know there was a dump": Scott Ruhren of Rutgers University walks through the now-closed Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.



By Beth A. Kaiser, AP

Hot property: Dump once took up to 29,000 tons of trash a day.

the West Roxbury section of the city to create a park larger than Boston Common and the Public Garden combined. Named "Millennium Park," it opened last year.

► Fulton County, Ga., is leasing an old landfill in Sandy Springs to a developer who is building a golf course. When the course opens later this year, it will be one of more than 60 golf courses on former landfills around the nation.

► Home Depot built a store four years ago atop a landfill in San Rafael, Calif. The job was expensive — 750 pilings had to be driven an average of 175 feet to reach solid ground — but worth it because prime retail locations were so rare in the area.

In the past decade, more than 3,000 municipal landfills have closed, mostly because they were full or didn't comply with govern-

About Fresh Kills

The number of active landfills in the city of New York dropped from 89 in 1934 to zero when Fresh Kills closed this year. The city now transfers trash to areas in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Facts about the world's largest municipal garbage dump:

Opened: April 16, 1948
Years as active landfill: 53
Years as New York's sole landfill: 10

Area: 2,200 acres, nearly three times the size of Central Park.

Cost to dump trash, per ton
Fresh Kills \$43
Out of state \$63

Cost to city to collect and dispose of residential trash, annually
Before Fresh Kills closed \$438 million
After Fresh Kills closed \$658' million

1 — Estimate
 Source: New York Sanitation Department



Landfill gas produced by decomposing garbage:
 50 million cubic feet a day.

Amount of landfill gas currently processed and sold as natural gas to a utility:
 14 million cubic feet a day, which can supply about 14,000 homes.

By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

ment regulations. "They're sort of ignored," says Steven Handel, a Rutgers University ecologist who heads a team trying to create a natural landscape at Fresh Kills. "But it's a huge chunk of America." No chunk is larger than Fresh

closed and people kept throwing away more things.

Twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, refuse poured into Fresh Kills — up to 29,000 tons a day at the dump's peak in the late 1980s. Each new load was piled on top, until four great mounds rose almost 20 stories high each.

By night, there were rats as big as cats, raccoons as big as dogs. There were legends about what was buried there: bodies, diamond rings, priceless heirlooms, a circus elephant. Children told of ghosts who roamed the mounds searching for lost possessions.

The smell (think rotten eggs) was overpowering, the pace frenetic. A workforce of more than 600, using cranes, front loaders, dump trucks and bulldozers, tried to keep up with the flow of trash. So did the gulls, who covered the mounds like snow.

Staten Island, the outermost of New York City's outer boroughs, regarded the dump with a tempered hatred. To space travelers, Fresh Kills may have looked like one of man's largest creations, but to Staten Islanders, it symbolized their low rank in the municipal order.

Then, in 1993, Giuliani was elected mayor with support from Staten Island Republicans. Three years later, Giuliani and Gov. George Pataki, also a Republican, promised to close Fresh Kills by 2001. Staten Is-

landers, who had heard such promises before, were skeptical.

But this year, on the second day of spring, it happened. A barge with red, white and blue bunting and a sign, "Last Garbage Barge to Fresh Kills," sailed down the East River, passing Gracie Mansion and a waving Giuliani.

"It was a surreal moment," says James Oddo, a Staten Island member of the City Council. "I thought this monstrosity would be open for the rest of my life."

Now, the Beast will slowly turn into Beauty. Like all retired landfills, Fresh Kills is a highly engineered piece of construction. Each hill of garbage is covered by several feet of topsoil and, below that, a vast synthetic sheet to keep out rain. The hill is also laced with an invisible network of drains, barriers, trenches, gauges and vents to collect, divert and treat the foul liquids and gases the dump's decomposing core will continue to produce for decades.

The landfill will settle several feet a year. In a few years it will be safe for playing, running and hiking. In about 30 years, substantial structures can be built on it. Unlike an industrial "brownfield," Fresh Kills doesn't have to be cleaned up as much as contained while its garbage slowly rots away until only non-organic material is left.

Meanwhile, the city's trash — about 13,000 tons a day, reduced more than half from its historic peak because of recycling — is being sent by truck and rail (and eventually barge) to New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia for incineration or burial. It isn't cheap: the average disposal cost is \$63 a ton, compared with \$43 at Fresh Kills.

As the city debates the future of Fresh Kills, the landfill will slowly blend into its surroundings. Many former landfills are covered only with grass and look like great, unobtrusive humps on the landscape. But scientists from Rutgers are planting clusters of trees and bushes they hope will spread.

"In a few years this should look like an old farm landscape," says Scott Ruhren of Rutgers. "You won't know there was a dump here."

Officials were going to ceremoniously padlock the dump on July Fourth to mark Staten Island's "independence" from the landfill, but those plans have been canceled.

"The steam is out of the issue," Molinari says. "People are on to other issues."

Only the gulls will mourn.