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Business Recycling: Lamorinda Strives to Reach Target

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In late July, Orinda Council Member Victoria Smith and Moraga Vice-Mayor Karen Mendonca led the meeting of the Board of the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority (CCCSWA) as President and Vice-President. The subject was commercial recycling, a timely subject for the Board for two reasons - current service agreements will expire late next year, and the district is not meeting its diversion target despite advances in the areas of commercial food waste recycling and construction and demolition (C&D) waste program.

"Commercial recycling is rocket science," explained CCSWA Executive Director Paul Morsen at a recent workshop. The diversity of the needs and expectations of its clients has led the agency to choose a participatory approach, conducting information sessions to get input from stakeholders. Based on the data collected and its own research, the Board will make a decision on how commercial waste will be recycled in our area for at least the next ten years. CCCSWA recently made a presentation to businesses at the Lafayette library. Morsen started by setting the stage, "The State of California mandates that a total of 50% of the municipal solid waste (MSW) be diverted from landfill," he said. "Our single family residential recycling numbers are at 56% and the commercial sector is at 27%." Additionally, by January 2012, businesses that produce more than four cubic yards of waste per week will be required to recycle.

"Right now commercial recycling is managed through a permit system," explained Morsen. "Recyclers wanting to service this sector apply for and are granted a permit to provide commercial recycling services to businesses. The permit system does not work." Morsen believes that his agency is beginning to recognize that the commercial sector is a group of different sub-sectors each with its own peculiarities and needs. "At this time we are not partial to any one type of approach (exclusive franchises, multiple franchises, dividing the service area into various geographical areas or collection by size) but are looking at everything," he stated.

The business participants in the July workshop expressed their concerns, one of which was how to motivate the property managers of large commercial or multi-use buildings to work with business tenants on effective recycling programs. "Who is key here?" asked Paul Morsen. "The janitors - recycling has to be part of their job description and they need to be provided adequate training and tools."

Moraga Hardware's Bill Snider said that he had conducted successful e-waste recycling events, but it's difficult to find a service that will recycle pallets or fluorescent light bulbs.

Participants suggested that different businesses be treated differently. They asked the agency to show property managers and business owners how to save money through recycling. "The cost of disposal should be the responsibility of the manufacturer," added Snider, "not the retailer." Cost was the top concern of the businesses present.

At the Board meeting a few days later members interviewed representatives from San Jose and Pleasant Hill, where recycling is mandatory. "San Jose has divided itself into two geographic districts, each of which is served by a different company. This way, the representative explained, if one company comes up with a new program, they can ask the other company to emulate it," reported Smith.

"While board members will certainly debate the pros and cons of single versus multiple franchises, I personally think that making commercial recycling part of the garbage package makes the most sense," she said, suggesting that CCCSWA could bundle recycling with garbage, so that each commercial customer receives both garbage and recycling containers as part of its standard service, all on one bill; similar to its single-family residential service.

Businesses will have more opportunities to express their preferences as CCCSWA continues to gather input. "At this time we've scheduled no additional workshops in Lamorinda but probably will over the next year," said Morsen. "The workshops and other activities are geared towards providing information from which staff can make recommendations to the board. Among our ideas are to undertake a survey, talk to chambers of commerce and assess successes in other jurisdictions."

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