

COMMUNITY-BASED RECYCLING PUT ON HOLD

Cambridge's failed bid to replicate the ERS

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In 1993, a non-profit community-based employment and counselling agency in Cambridge, Ontario, devised an innovative plan to combine and address local employment problems and recycling initiatives under one roof. It proposed making Waterloo Region's Materials Recycling Centre (MRC) the vehicle of an ambitious job development and training program - an initiative to give work and hope to people marginalized by the labour market.

CODA'S PROPOSAL FOR THE MRC

The bid of the Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA) to operate the MRC was in competition with offers from three professional waste management companies. Although CODA lacked its competitors' recycling experience, it designed its proposal with the aid of top recycling experts and others with proven experience.

Under CODA's proposal, five key operating goals and tenets would have made the MRC a substantial contributor to the community, both socially and commercially:

- efficient, competitive operation.
- on-the-job-training, work experience and jobs for the employment disadvantaged.
- increased public participation in solid waste reduction and proposals to add to the list of recyclable materials.
- profits recycled to the community and supplies purchased from regional sources.
- public awareness of the long-term benefits of projects that use community economic development as a model.

According to CODA's executive director, Paul Born, there was another factor that made CODA's proposal still more compelling. By its very nature, recycling can and should be a mass volunteer effort. In Waterloo region alone, Born says, "the fact is that everyday close to 150,000 people choose to volunteer their time to separate their garbage for recycling purposes." If CODA operated the MRC, it proposed to encourage people to increase their recycling efforts. Recycling would become even more of a community project. "When you know that you're helping somebody every time you wash out a tin can, to a small degree, you feel good."

That kind of participation would be undermined, however, if recycling became the cash cow of a select group. As Born says, "with private enterprise, all the profit goes to the individual. Every time you volunteer to wash out that can of tomato sauce, you've just made someone richer." If people know their voluntary labour is making somebody a lot of money, they are naturally inclined to stop contributing. "They simply say, 'I'm not going to wash the dried tomato sauce out of this tin can. I'll just throw it out.'"

CODA's bid to operate the MRC was in competition with offers from three professional waste management companies. Lacking its competitors' recycling experience, CODA instead proposed an ambitious job development & training program - an initiative to give work and hope to people marginalized by the labour market.

Originally published in *Making Waves*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 1995).

CODA would have run the MRC profit free, and eventually the program would have recycled surpluses back to the community. Says Born,

“What we were saying is that we would give them 50% of any revenue over expenditure. The other 50% would have gone into developing more programs or community businesses. So, every dollar that was made would go back to regional coffers or back to the community.”

Initially, CODA’s bid was considerably higher than the rest due to the cost of training allowances. So, in a final effort to stay in the running, Born sought the support of the provincial government. Officials supported the innovative proposal and contributed a \$128,000 grant towards the training portion of the proposal.

With the cost of training allowances removed, CODA’s final bid came in at \$885,000. A professional waste management company, HGC Management of Oakville, bid \$880,000 and was awarded the contract.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Mike Lawrie, CODA’s business advisor, said regional council chose HGC because they were wary of a new idea and its community economic development perspective:

“It’s a lot simpler to stay with the status quo - the typical commercial approach that doesn’t introduce . . . a lot of other considerations. . . . [like] budgets from social services, provincial and federal government areas along with the municipality’s.”

Carl Zehr was a Waterloo regional councillor at the time. He said in a recent interview that he was “predisposed to finding a way for CODA to be the ultimate winner” of the contract. But in the final analysis, he “wasn’t satisfied with the accuracy, the strength, and the validity of the figures that CODA was presenting.”

There were other concerns, as well, said Zehr. “When you go through the ten-

der process, you have to have some fairness. You have to be able to put forward your position and take your best shot. Whoever gets the best shot, gets the contract.” CODA wanted to continue negotiating during bidding. “That flew in the face of the tendering process.” When all was said and done, Zehr said he voted against CODA, in part, “because I had a responsibility to defend the process and not my own personal preference.”

HGC president, Herb Lambacher, said CODA’s proposal was not viable because employment disadvantaged and disabled people “would not have wanted those low-paid, low-skilled jobs.” He said that recycling is not a good training vehicle because the skills involved cannot be used competitively in today’s job market. They would not help the workers get a job elsewhere, if the need arose.

Nor did CODA’s dollars-to-jobs ratio make sense, said Lambacher. Under his company, the MRC operates with 11 employees. CODA proposed to employ 17. It would have made for “a very expensive social program to place a few additional people,” he comments.

Lastly, Lambacher asserts, employees have to be able to interchange tasks if a recycling plant is to be an effective operation. The MRC could not be efficiently operated if it employed challenged people who did not have the use of all of their faculties. Says Lambacher,

“There is a misconception that a recycling plant is people sitting in a warm plant beside a conveyor sorting cans. But if a Bobcat operator goes off and the others don’t have the physical ability to fill his job, what happens then?”

But to Born, CODA’s plan to employ and train 17 job-challenged individuals at the MRC made sense:

“It was to be a step-ladder approach. It would have created work skills and then we would have worked with them, every year, to try to find

them other work. We weren’t saying that we were going to create permanent jobs for 17 people. We saw it as a step up to other work.”

CODA’s proposal envisaged workers set up in teams. “Each team would have had a person that was quite skilled who would co-ordinate people with lower skills.” Most team members would have eventually obtained sufficient skills to permit job flexibility. He cites in his defence the award-winning performance of the Edmonton Recycling Society, which has a 40% developmentally handicapped workforce.

A TEMPORARY SETBACK ONLY?

Lambacher says that if CODA is really concerned with helping disadvantaged people, it should invest its efforts elsewhere. For one, it could supply lists of people to the many employers now seeking employment-challenged people in order to meet the standards of a new provincial employment equity program. Available jobs could then be matched to applicants. “I think that CODA should ask themselves what their business is,” said Lambacher.

But as far as Born is concerned, the decision to award the MRC contract to another bidder was ultimately the result of “last-minute backroom bargaining.” For six months afterwards, he was devastated and “disillusioned with the political process” because he had put his “heart and soul” into a proposal that regional councillors passed over in favour of the status quo.

Will CODA submit another bid when the region puts the MRC up to tender again? CODA has every intention of winning the next round, affirms Born. To do that, he said, “We will seek political support. We will work with the politicians, write a proposal with them to gain their confidence . . . because this must happen.” ❧

Frank Knobloch is a volunteer at the Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA), Cambridge, Ontario.