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League's Trash Talk advocates producer responsibility policies

by Ginny Lamere



Trash talk panelists (from left) Brooke Nash, Ann Dorfman, Amy Perlmutter and State Representative Cory Atkins share their advice on how to reduce waste at the "Let's Talk Trash" forum held in the Concord Academy Chapel. (Courtesy photo)

Producers of products need to be held accountable for disposal costs. That was the strong message from keynote speaker Lynne Pledger at a forum entitled "Let's Talk Trash," presented by the Concord-Carlisle League of Women Voters on October 14.

Pledger advocated for an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policy for a wide range of products. She believes that if producers were required to pay for "discard management," they would have an incentive to make products and packaging more environmentally friendly. This would also relieve cities and towns of the financial burden associated with waste disposal costs. Pledger is convinced that EPR policies would also lead to more durable products, green jobs and less waste. Such policies are already in place in 30 countries and 19 U.S. states.

Ever-increasing trash

Pledger delved into issue of the ever-increasing amount of rubbish, or non-organic trash, the U.S. discards annually. It is more than ten times the amount generated in 1900 and more than twice the amount generated in 1960. She gave two major reasons for why there is so much waste. “Brand-owners do not pay for solid waste management,” she said, so they have no incentive to make their products and packaging less harmful to the environment or reusable. The second reason is the high rate of U.S consumption. Quoting Joshua Stolaroff of the Product Policy Institute, Pledger stated, “The EPA issued a report that explains our consumption in the United States makes the largest contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.”

Zero waste



Keynote speaker Lynne Pledger is a member of Clean Water Action, chair of the MA Sierra Club Zero Waste, co-founder of Go-Waste in MA and member of Hardwick Recycling Commission. (Courtesy photo)

“Zero waste,” she said, “is a plan for systematic reduction of waste...It’s unrealistic to go on as we are,” because of the diminishing resources and fuel needed to replace discarded products. In addition, disposing of the waste contributes to global warming, water and air pollution. The goal is to divert waste away from an incinerator or a landfill to a compost facility or recycling center, or to repair or process it for re-use.

Pledger touted San Francisco as a fine example of what can be done. It has had a waste reduction plan for roughly three decades. In 2000, 50% of what was discarded was diverted away from incinerators, and by 2004, 63% was diverted. Their goal is to divert 75% by 2010. They now have mandatory separation of organic waste and curbside pickup for both organic and non-organic waste. She said if that city can have such positive results, other cities and towns can make similar progress.

Pledger, a member of Clean Water Action in Massachusetts, explained that the group is running a statewide campaign to promote Extended Producer Responsibility policies. She also believes the state needs a Massachusetts Product Stewardship Council, similar to those in New York, Vermont and Connecticut. Product Stewardship is an environmental management strategy which makes anyone who designs, produces or uses a product, share in the responsibility for minimizing the product’s environmental impact, including all stages of the product’s life cycle and end-of-life management. To advocate on the local level, residents can ask their selectmen to pass a resolution supporting EPR policies for Massachusetts, Pledger suggested, in an email after the forum.

The Massachusetts Department of Environment Protection is now planning for the next decade. Should they build more waste disposal sites or create more waste reduction programs? Pledger said there are many more jobs in waste reduction than in waste disposal.

Panel discussion

Following the keynote address, there was a panel discussion, including Cory Atkins,

Massachusetts State Representative; Brooke Nash, chief of the municipal waste reduction program of the Massachusetts EPA; Anne Dorfman, a recycling and resource management consultant; Amy Perlmutter, a member of Governor Deval Patrick's energy and environment transition team.

Atkins talked about the obstacles of getting EPR Policies passed. Currently, there are two key bills pending before the legislature that relate to waste management, although they have been stuck in committee for years.

The first is the Updated Bottle Bill (H 3515) which would expand the types of containers subject to the five-cent deposit to include bottles containing water, flavored waters, coffee-based drinks, juices and sports drinks. Atkins said, "We will get it out of committee."

The second bill is the E-Waste Bill (H 833) which would make electronics producers responsible for disposal costs. Atkins said this bill was more complicated. "It's a function of money," she said, and currently the State doesn't have any money for this bill. She pointed out, though, that chairs of the committees holding these bills need to hear from their constituency that they want the bills to pass.

Atkins reminded the crowd that consumers are the most powerful force. "There are more of them than voters and recyclers." She said that European countries consume a lot less than Americans. In addition, she pointed out there were major jobs in reusing, reducing and recycling discarded material. Both Atkins and Massachusetts State Senator Susan Fargo support the bottle bill and the e-waste bill.

Nash spoke about the "Triple Bottom Line," a criterion for measuring organizational or company success by economic viability, social responsibility and environmental stewardship. She's a strong advocate of programs that foster reuse because of their social benefits to welfare recipients and job training for the mentally handicapped and youths at risk.

Nash pointed out that there are "resource" trucks in Boston and Springfield that will pick up discarded building materials. While industrial building materials, medical equipment and chemicals can frequently be reused, getting those items to the receivers can be difficult. "Poor people don't have cars to pick up goods," she said.

Nash also strongly supported "Pay-as-you-throw" policies, saying communities see a 25 to 40% reduction in trash and an increase in recycling. Dorfman, who had been the recycling manager in Concord and involved in recycling for 20 years, told consumers to push back on producers to use less or more environmentally-friendly packaging. She also said there needs to be more focus on recycling in the workplace. One of her goals is to have the same recycling program in communities across the state. Perlmutter suggested that the audience "Find out: Where do things come from? Where do they go?" She advocated starting businesses around the reuse of specific items that get thrown away. "Find an economic benefit from the waste stream."