

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR RURAL RECYCLING



Green teams or community groups are organizations that support municipal or county sustainability initiatives, such as recycling, composting, collection for hard to recycle or hazardous materials, or education and awareness events. They can be started by a municipality or residents themselves, but work very effectively when in partnership with the area government.

This case study covers two rural organizations focused on recycling and resource management. Started by residents or by municipal officials, both groups are headed and maintained by community members working with local governments to support public interests.

Washington County Recycling Association

History:

The Washington County Recycling Association is a recycling center created and run by resident volunteers. It was developed in response to the construction of the Douglas County Landfill next to the border of Washington County in 1990. The first recycling effort was on Earth Day in April of 1990. Efforts continued on an every-other-month schedule until 1996 when weekly recycling was established. With a grant from the Department of Environmental Quality, the Association moved into the current building on February 23, 1999. The Washington County Recycling Association is incorporated as a non-profit organization.

Municipal Partnerships

In the beginning, the Association had a strong partnership with the City of Blair and Washington County. Although Washington County has since withdrawn its involvement, the Association still maintains a partnership with the City of Blair. The City of Blair owns the land that the Recycling Association Building is located on.

Community Engagement

The WCRA has volunteer groups such as church organizations, social groups, and businesses that provide volunteers on a periodic basis. Volunteers meet each Saturday and Tuesday for a half day or work.

A member of the Association provides tours of the facility whenever asked. He discusses with various groups what recyclable materials are accepted, the marketing of that material, and how it is recycled into a useful product. Brochures and mass media are most often used to inform the public about what can and cannot be recycled.



Budget

The WCRA is volunteer-operated and so profit from material sales is applied to equipment maintenance, operating costs, communication, and scholarships for student volunteers. When recyclable material prices are down, expenses are reduced accordingly. In all but some minor expenses which the city pays, the Recycling Association is self-sustaining.

Governance

WCRA is made up of a Board of Directors which includes a President elected by the Board. The Board meets quarterly to make decisions on the topics in hand. Designated volunteers have responsibilities for marketing of the recycling products, setting up times for groups to volunteer, working with potential scholarship recipients and others.

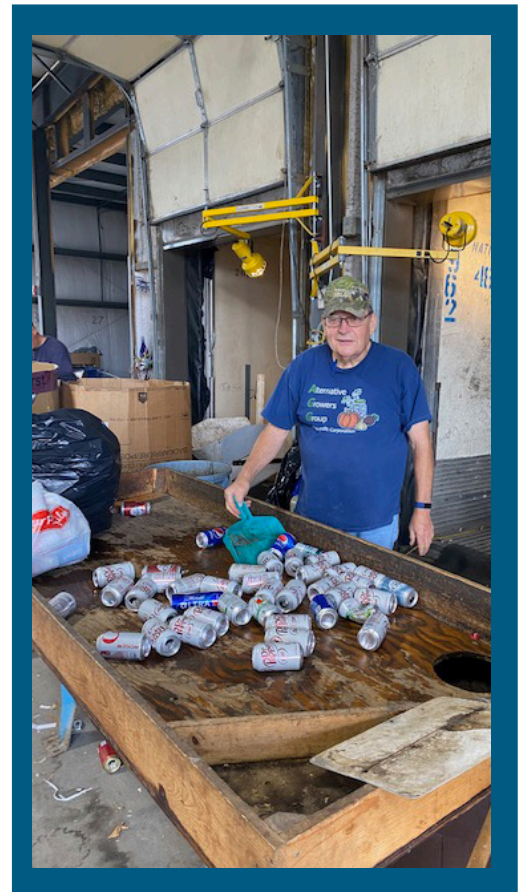
Challenges

Continuity of leadership. The core group is aging, including individuals who have leading roles in marketing and administration. This has been of concern since the Association's inception.

Materials market and competition. Currently unable to sell plastics #3, #4, and #5. These materials are baled and stored until an outlet is found. Additionally, several haulers have entered the market that are collecting recyclables and working with recycling centers outside of the WCRA. Leadership at WCRA celebrates the increased access, but it has diminished material collection for the Association, impacting the economy of scale needed to make the frequency of sales needed to sustain the operation.

Milestones

The Association has recently celebrated 31 years in operation. During those 31 years over 32 million pounds of material have been recycled by the Association.



Wayne Green Team

History

The Wayne Green Team is a sustainability steering group for the City of Wayne, providing direction for the City based on citizen advocacy and organizing significant waste reduction events and education campaigns for Wayne residents. Board members represent areas of interest for the city and elevate resident concerns.

Former mayor Lois Shelton (2005-2011) started the Wayne Green Team in 2009. She and former city administrator Lowell Johnson were inspired through sustainability exhibitions in Portland, Oregon, which provided direction on community involvement in sustainability initiatives and recycling.

With the full support of the City Council, Mayor Shelton called volunteers into action that were passionate about the environment recruiting through radio and print media.

A diverse group of 15 individuals met to discuss ways to increase awareness of environmental issues and to increase recycling efforts. The Wayne Green Team set three areas of initial focus:

1. Reducing the waste stream & increasing recycling in Wayne
2. Reducing energy use at the municipal and private levels, and
3. Decreasing water consumption while increasing retention of storm water.

The city administrator felt they should have funds to carry out their work so they set aside \$500 from the Mayor's budget. This funding continues today.

Partnerships

The WGT describes great support from city staff members, including city administrator, streets director, park director, controller, and administrative assistant. Once a year, city administrator attends the meeting for Q&A and updates. There is an open line of communication to city leadership and elected officials.

The Green Team partners regularly with Wayne State College, their student Green Team, and their student-athletes who help at events.

Programming

The Wayne Green Team educates the community on how to minimize waste and promote sustainable behavior through:

Public Outreach & Education. Public outreach and education includes an annual Chamber Coffee at the Wayne Public Library to highlight the community's impact with Zero Waste and present the Zero Hero Award to a community member, business or organization. The WGT additionally hosts a no-cost Earth Day movie at the local theatre, attracting 70-90 people, with info and tips on how to recycle in Wayne. This event includes demos and info on how to reduce waste in Wayne. Volunteers from the team teach Earth Day lessons to elementary students every April.

Past events have included hosting info booths and activities at the Wayne Farmers Market, Wayne Chicken Show, Wayne Elementary School, and Wayne State College. The Green Team has also given presentations to groups, such as Wayne Rotary, Kiwanis, PEO, Mothers of Pre-Schoolers, and Head Start.

Projects

The organization started a Zero Waste Marketing Campaign in 2017 to promote waste reduction opportunities in Wayne. The campaign includes a Zero Waste in Wayne flier and Recycle Right ad series. They have since updated and continued to advertise in 2021 with funding from NDEE.

Funding

The Wayne Green Team is funded annually at \$500 from the Mayor's budget, intended for communication efforts with the residents. Grants through the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy fund collection events and greater education efforts. Through collection events, they solicit additional donations. Total grant funding since 2013 adds up to \$72,000.

Governance

The Team meets monthly, 9 times a year, the 2nd Tuesday of month at noon. Monthly email updates are sent to 60 people on their mailing list.

The organization relies on volunteers. There are no formal positions, but there are a core group of people who post event fliers around town when needed, attend meetings, volunteer at events. Many are retired.



Challenges

Recycling education. Education campaigns of where to take materials, when, and how are ongoing and the method of delivering this education is constantly changing. The team has received reports of residents misusing the bins in City parks and downtown. Without significant cooperation from the City hauler, it is difficult to know the scope of the issue. The team can never take for granted that organizations they have worked with in the past will continue proper recycling signage and education.

Continuity of leadership. Recruiting new volunteers and board leaders has been a perennial challenge. There has never been a clear succession plan and the City has not yet been involved in the process of recruitment.

Measuring impact. Between collection events, education campaigns, and coordinating materials outlets, it is challenging to know where to focus efforts with an all-volunteer team. This has made it challenging to work towards goals and has created "volunteer fatigue" among team.

Milestones

In 2014, the City Council voted to adopt new policies on Energy Conservation and Zero Waste into the City's Comprehensive Plan. Those policies were incorporated into the March 2017 Comprehensive Plan, 7.9-7.13. Page 7.12 identifies the goals to "Create a Zero Waste Community." This has been key to falling back on whenever new city council members have expressed skepticism in investing in the program.

Other milestones include:

- Ripple Glass started in 2016 and through this program, they have recycled over 37 tons of glass.
- In partnership with the City Library, over 2,000 pounds of batteries have been collected since 2017
- 337 pounds of string lights have been collected since 2015
- Held 2 Green Move Outs at Wayne State College in 2014 and 2015 via the "Don't Dump, Donate" campaign, diverting more than 3,000 pounds of trash from the landfill.
- Held 4 Wayne Green Expos from 2010-2013 as the Earth Day event, featuring green products, seminars and eco-activities. 150-200 people regularly attended.
- Hosted 8 Electronics Recycling events each fall since 2013, diverting 145,000 pounds of electronics from the landfill.