

## **Where Does the Money Go?**

Back when we began laying out our Elements '97 issue, I announced my interest in finding out how much various options cost and how (and how well) investment in these activities related to results. I was prompted to explore this line of inquiry in the belief that, this far into the privatization era, there were bound to be good, solid, bankable answers available for the asking. Would you be surprised to learn that I know, if anything, less today than I thought I knew six months ago? That's only part of what's on my mind, however.

Several months ago I was speaking on the phone with the head of a large waste management authority who, though I didn't know it at the time (perhaps he didn't either just then), was on the brink of resigning the position. While I'm sure he had many reasons for his decision, the concern he voiced was that he no longer was sure for whom it was he worked or (following the same line of reasoning) what it was he was supposed to be doing. It wasn't just the flak that all of us are used to getting that was on his mind, it was the issue of privatization. Where once he had been able to remind himself that what he did was in the public's interest, here the public's interest seem to be telling him to take a hike...so he did. What a loss to the industry as a whole and the taxpayers in his community. But the episode also made me think about the public's disenchantment with the way its institutions are being run, and while I don't think that the answer lies in clearing the decks and putting control of vital municipal services into the hands of private enterprise, we all know the depth of the frustration.

Getting back to my opening thought. If I were a shareholder of a private corporation and had as much trouble figuring out its P&L statement--where and how to apply costs--as I had in this little exercise, I too would be pretty upset. In fact I'd probably say something about "fiduciary responsibility," and call my broker. Only here in the area of municipal waste management there's no way we can dump the stock. We're talking "stewardship over a public trust," and this is where things get muddy from my vantage point. In the November/December issue of MSW Management this column focused attention on a situation that exemplifies the dissociation of government and the public (the two-tiered tip-fee debacle that has demolished waste management plans within the county and throughout the region). If the Orange County, CA supervisors had thought that the public knew what they were up to and what issues were at stake, I doubt that they would have tried to launch such an absurd scheme. With the cat out of the bag, I, were I in their shoes, would not like to try to explain what prompted such a charade.

It is not my purpose, however, to go after the deep and mysterious workings of political bodies, but to call attention to the stake we all have in the public's knowledge and awareness of any of its institutions, particularly one so large and critical as its solid waste system. It's tempting to view stewardship as a burden we bear on behalf of others, but the "trust" involved is a two way street. As stewards we are responsible for the well-being of all matters for which we are given charge, but the obligation implies a reciprocal...the active support of the public in the process. The question is, what kind of support can the public provide when it is ignorant of the workings of its institutions and the return it's getting on its investment? The full and effective exercise of our stewardship relies on the active and informed support of the public. One thing certain is that the proponents of privatization won't pass up the opportunity to post their agenda. If you want the public's support, you better make sure it knows your side of the story...facts, figures, opportunities, and (if it comes to it) the risks involved in weakening or removing public oversight from the MSW management equation. I can think of no better outlook than the thought that 1997 could be the year the public was brought fully into the picture...willing or not.

## **1997 Prognostications**

In 1996 we announced the creation of an initiative called the *Enterprise for the Environment*, chaired by former EPA administrator and, more recently, Chairman of the Board of BFI, William D. Ruckelshaus. The goal of the project is to suggest legislative reforms for EPA that will bring about more efficient and flexible environmental protection and restore public confidence in EPA decision-making. This project intends to build a broad, durable, consensus for comprehensive reform and improvement of the environmental management system. To date, these efforts have been overshadowed by election distractions, but my crystal ball says that after a four-year hiatus, environmental issues and concerns are about to hit center stage.