

## Once More With Feeling

It shouldn't come as too much of a surprise that some of the large vertically-integrated waste management firms have fallen on economic hard times, causing them to revisit their strategic plans and take steps to stop the bleeding. "Pulling in the horns" on new acquisitions and new equipment is the necessary first step, of course, but divestiture of the most costly and/or least profitable activities is the one with ominous implications for all of us. What happens if you've just closed your landfill, sold the equipment, waved good-bye to the no-longer necessary operations personnel, and turned the business over to one of the "Big Boys," only to get a call saying, "Corporate just decided to pursue other options?" Substitute collection, transfer, processing as the case may be...where are *your* options? Just pick up the pieces and carry on as before? Not likely. Do you want to bet that because they made the decision to accept a new swimming pool in return for the waste franchise, your city council is going to welcome you with open arms when you come to them looking for help? Fat Chance. In fact, chances are you're going to get a lesson in the separation of "authority" and "responsibility" where the pursuit of short-term goals has prevailed over long-term fiduciary responsibility. Not your fault, you want to say? That, along with 10,000 "I told you so's," is not going to get the trash safely stowed.

"Strategic Realignment" might not be the only thing you have to worry about. Pull a week's worth of newspapers from your recyclables box and see how many column-inches are devoted to waste-related horror stories. While the public may have thought itself ill-served by what it perceived to be inefficient publicly-administered programs, how long do you think it will stand still for the kinds of criminal behavior in waste management it sees hitting the headlines? And don't think that just because you aren't involved you're out of the line of fire. Long after the culprits have gone to their just rewards, guess whom the public will hold accountable? Even if you're prepared to argue that the "good guys" vastly outnumber the opportunists in waste management, one outrage will color perception far out of proportion to its substantive impact. Unfair? Probably. But there's justice at work as well when you're dealing with a service that is fundamental to the public's health and welfare. If you think the public isn't aware of what's going on, take a walk down any city street in the country and ask 10 strangers at random what they think about the solid waste industry. How much are you willing to bet that opinion sits on the plus side of the ledger? "OK," you say. "What do we do?"

It goes almost without saying that the best answer lies in the admonition--echoed time and again on these pages and anywhere MSW managers meet to talk about their chief concerns--"Never, never, surrender your options." If you are still under siege, hold firm. When popular opinion holds that the smartest or easiest way out of the hardships of waste management lies in closing up shop and turning over the keys for this or that activity to someone else, make sure that everyone around you understands the risks. Poor performance on the part of the contractor is just one concern. Sure, that can be a real headache, but the consequences (and remedies) are minor in comparison to having to jump back in and grab the reins when the contractor decides to pull out. If, after all the pressure of late to turn services over to the private sector, you find yourself still master of your own fate, praise whatever providence spared you from being between the proverbial rock-and-a-hard-spot... but don't become complacent.

It's those who have surrendered their options who face the challenge of reinventing and redeveloping these options from thin air. This can be accomplished once you realize that you have no other choice, but preferably not when it's hitting the fan...and certainly not without the knowledge and support of the public and its elected officials to whom you answer. How? You can start by reaffirming loudly and clearly what we all know...that we haven't the right to jeopardize the public's welfare for the sake of expediency.