

# How to Minimize Your Waste Management Costs

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**T**HE costs associated with municipal solid waste (MSW) management—economic, environmental, political—are most effectively addressed through a combination of strategies. This finding emerged from a nationwide survey of public officials, independent consultants, industry spokespersons, public interest representatives, and others.

The purpose of this effort is to provide decision-makers with credible insight on how a community's MSW can most effectively be managed. Key survey findings, discussed in greater detail below, include:

- Political controversy and the high economic cost associated with existing MSW management systems are primary concerns.
- The lack of public support for siting new facilities continues to be a problem.
- Combining MSW management options in a manner best suited to meet local needs will help minimize economic cost.
- Implementing state-of-the-art MSW systems, bearing economic cost in mind, will help minimize environmental cost.
- Better public education, coupled with direct public involvement in the decision-making process, will help minimize political cost.

## Survey Methodology And Questions

The MSW cost minimization survey was conducted in two phases, the first from November to December 1991 and the second from August to September 1992. A total of 300 surveys were distributed and a response rate of 47 percent was achieved. The target audience was intentionally diverse to provide a range of perspectives.

A profile of the survey respondents is provided in Table 1, which reflects that state officials, local officials, and independent consultants were the groups who submitted the most completed questionnaires. Most respondents are located in Washington, D. C., New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Surveys were received from respondents in 42 states and two were sent from Canada.

The key questions asked in the MSW management cost minimization survey and a summary of responses follow. For all these questions, respondents had the option of selecting more than one of the available answers (plus the option of providing their own answer).

**1. What concerns you most about the current status of municipal waste**

**management in your community/region?** Among those concerns noted about the current MSW management system operating in communities, political controversy was most often cited by the survey respondents (39 percent). This was followed by high economic cost (28 percent), and outdated management system (27 percent). The lack of local MSW disposal capacity and the posing of a threat to human health and the environment (HH & E) were mentioned by 19 percent and 18 percent of the respondents, respectively.

Looking at the concerns of only public officials (i.e., federal, state, regional, county, and local), economic cost was noted by 46 percent, followed by political controversy (43 percent), old management system (28 percent), lack of disposal capacity (20 percent), and threat to HH & E (16 percent).

Other concerns about the current MSW system mentioned independently by survey respondents include:

- A lack of good information to make informed decisions, coupled with inadequate

public education and awareness, often perpetuated by misinformation from special interests. In addition, 42 percent felt that the lack of understanding about the technical capability of modern systems is a problem, while 40 percent noted high economic costs. The lack of clear, sensible regulations was mentioned by 20 percent of the survey respondents.

By comparison, 62 percent of the public officials felt that the lack of public support is a problem, followed by economic cost (46 percent), technology misunderstanding (30 percent), and lack of regulations (19 percent).

Other concerns about a new MSW management option mentioned by survey respondents include:

- The lack of data on the life-cycle costs (i.e., cradle to grave) associated with the various MSW management options, including the relative HH & E risk.
- The lack of political leadership at all levels of government, leading to minimal strategic planning and a lack of courage to implement modern programs.
- Insufficient long-term recycling markets and incentives such as tax penalties on virgin materials.

**3. How can all of your community's/region's waste be managed at the least economic cost?** Combining management options in a manner best suited to meet local needs (i.e., in an integrated fashion) was cited by 83 percent of all respondents and 88 percent of the public officials. Seeking competitive bids on systems was the distant second choice noted by 29 percent of all respondents and 28 percent of the public officials. The third choice by 9 percent and 4 percent of all respondents and public officials, respectively, was to not require excessive air pollution control or safety equipment at the facilities (i.e., beyond which is reasonable to ensure adequate protection of HH & E).

Other ways to minimize MSW management economic cost, as suggested by survey respondents, include:

- Better financial analysis of the various management options.
- Facilitating intermunicipal cooperation and centralizing management control to meet area needs.
- Implementing waste-to-energy systems to the fullest extent.
- Creating/finding markets for reusable and recyclable materials.
- Improving the state regulatory permitting process.

**4. How can all of your community's/region's waste be managed at the least environmental cost?** The recommendations offered by all survey respondents as well as only the public officials are

Table 1—Profile of Survey Respondents

Group	Number of Respondents	Percent of Total
Academic	3	2
Citizen	4	3
Financial Professional	2	1
Independent Consultant	24	17
Industry Representative	19	13
Local Media	5	4
Legal Professional	6	4
National Media	4	3
Public Interest Group	6	4
Public Official-Local	24	17
Public Official-County	6	4
Public Official-Regional	2	1
Public Official-State	31	22
Public Official-Federal	6	4
Total	142	100

quate public education, resulting in a poorly informed public who often express an unwillingness to pay the true cost of modern MSW management.

- The lack of intermunicipal cooperation, both at the state and regional levels.
- Inadequate development of markets for recyclable materials.

**2. What concerns (or would concern) you most about selecting and implementing a new municipal waste management option in your community/region?** The concern expressed by 54 percent of all survey respondents is the lack of public support for siting new facilities. Primary

essentially the same. More than 60 percent of both groups felt that state-of-the-art MSW systems should be implemented, bearing economic cost in mind. Nearly 40 percent of both groups noted that requiring local MSW solutions is a good strategy, while more than 20 percent mentioned that an environmental impact statement should be mandatory for all options. The last two solutions mentioned by less than 10 percent of both groups included passing stricter environmental laws and implementing modern systems without bearing economic cost in mind.

Other ways to minimize MSW management environmental cost, as suggested by survey respondents, include:

- Requiring state and regional solutions, with local input, to realize economies of scale.
- Integrated MSW management solutions, along with an environmental impact assessment on the entire system.
- Stricter enforcement of existing environmental laws.
- Better public education so citizens can understand risk assessment exposures.
- The use of technically-reliable information to assess the environmental impact of the various MSW management options.

**5. How can all of your community's/region's waste be managed at the least political cost?** Better education, coupled with direct public involvement in the decision-making process was noted by 80 percent of the total survey respondents and 83 percent of the public officials. Such involvement is most productive early on in the process. Sixty-one percent from both groups called for stronger elected official leadership. In addition, better cooperation among federal, state, and local governments was recommended by 46 percent of the total respondents and 57 percent of the public officials. More cooperation between industry and public interest groups was cited the least by each group, 42 and 43 percent, respectively.

Other ways to minimize MSW management political costs, as suggested by survey respondents, include:

- Providing benefits to those impacted by the siting of a facility through additional services, tax relief, and other means.
- Creating an independent MSW management authority that is removed from the direct political arena.
- Implementing clear federal MSW regulations to set an example for states, regions, and localities.
- Giving localities a stake in MSW management by developing job-creating markets for recyclables.

**6. What other comments can you offer regarding how municipal waste management decision-makers should minimize costs? Responses provided on additional means by which MSW management decision-makers can minimize costs include:**

Additional means by which MSW management decision-makers can minimize costs include:

- Manage MSW without regard to what is politically correct.
- Hire experienced consultants to help communities implement integrated systems.
- Privatize MSW management services and pursue private/municipal partnerships, as appropriate, to meet community needs.
- Look at long-term solutions, develop a master plan, and implement the course of action once it has been decided upon (i.e., do not prolong the action trying to satisfy extremists).
- Open up the MSW management infrastructure to more competition and allow market forces to determine options.
- Encourage more innovative, efficient solutions and less government control.

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