Editor's Comments MSW MA

No Place for Crises

My tolerance for those who introduce the threat of crisis into their problem-solving agenda is in increasingly short supply. Case in point. I was invited to participate in a waste planning review session during which a fellow invitee insisted that without developing a crisis scenario to capture public attention, the jurisdiction would not be able to achieve its goals. There was enough murmuring to suggest a lack of consensus among the panel, but just the thought that a public body might feel it necessary to stoop to the use of such stratagems is enough to send me scurrying for my soap box.

Among an almost endless catalog of faults I find in the insinuation of crisis to justify opportunistic actions by public bodies, there are three that stand out most vividly: the underlying assumption that people are too stupid to recognize choices and their consequences, the profound effect the continual bombardment of do-or-die promotions has on building public apathy for important projects even in the face of demonstrated need, and the inevitable backlash that occurs when the public learns it has once again been duped by its officials. No place is this last fault as apparent as today in the solid waste field where, after half a decade of serious, expensive, and often counterproductive efforts to implement worthwhile diversion programs, we find ourselves back almost to square-one, debating whether recycling is worth the effort. More than a few political adepts, noting the apparent voter frustration with all things public, have extracted data from the Franklin Associates report on The Role of Recycling in Integrated Solid Waste Management to the Year 2000 (see page 16 in this issue for more on the subject) and used them to foster the belief that curbside programs are a waste of "our" money. I do not believe all curbside programs to have been wisely conceived, intelligently planned, or diligently implemented, but neither they nor their siblings are what's at the heart of our growing concern over costs versus uncertain rewards.

Now, when the public has accepted the mandates for diversion, and programs finally have begun to bear real and tasty fruit, why have we suddenly gotten cold feet? Obviously there are any number of reasons that can be assigned to our loss of faith -- the sluggishness of the economy, fear of its further erosion by reduced consumption, crumbling infrastructure, increasing demands for public services, shrinking budgets, and dozens more -- all valid concerns and active parts of the equation. However, I believe the true culprits are (1) the premise -- that we were faced with a landfill crisis -- upon which EPA launched its reduce, reuse, recycle campaign in the first place and (2) the self-serving support of that position by large landfill owners who used the supposed crisis as an excuse to jack up their rates. What we do with waste, where we put it, how we treat it, and how we make sure it won't create more problems for our descendants, provides a variety of real challenges, not just to waste managers but to society as a whole. Certainly we need to deal with waste, but as a process, not a crisis, and certainly not with a remedy that starts from the tail end -- process or crisis.

The issue is stewardship, not just of landfill space, but of all resources we recognize increasingly as being in short supply. Imbued with such a vision, we can make decisions based on the evaluation of alternatives and their broader consequences rather than find ourselves involved in incessant knee-jerk reactions to agenda-spawned crises. Had public acceptance of diversion mandates evolved from a concern for resource management rather than in response to a limited and largely non-existent landfill crisis, would we now be stepping back five years later to ask, "What does is cost us to divert?" rather than asking, "What are the consequences of not husbanding our scarce resources?"