

Waste Management

Problem:

Improper waste management decisions by residents and businesses due to inadequate information, incentives, alternatives or regulations.

The amount of residential and business waste generated in the county is increasing with population and business growth. This increased amount of waste is being managed by traditional disposal methods of landfilling and waste-to-energy.¹ The county recycling rate of 46% is stagnant and is in risk of declining if waste generation and management trends are not addressed. If current waste generation and management trends continue, county residents will be at a greater risk for exposure to environmental contamination, increased costs for waste collection and disposal, and financial liability for environmental contamination caused by land disposal of waste.

The Washington County 2005 - 2024 Waste Management Master Plan has established a goal of achieving a solid waste recycling rate of 50%. This goal is supported by the State of Minnesota's waste management hierarchy² which supports the following practices in order of preference: waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and composting as management methods. This goal is further supported by the Twin Cities Metropolitan Solid Waste Management Policy Plan developed by and in cooperation with staff and officials from Anoka County, Carver County, Dakota County, Hennepin County, Ramsey County, Washington County and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. This plan is the basis for the development of the Washington County Solid Waste Management Master Plan. This plan is the county's guiding document for the development and implementation of solid waste and recycling programs that support sustainable communities and protect public health and the environment.

Residents are experiencing increased fuel and environmental surcharges charged by waste haulers which is applied to residential and commercial waste management services but not recycling services. These cost increases have caused an increase in awareness in the costs of waste disposal, but due to definitions in state laws, some commercial waste generators have been able to avoid paying the CEC while continuing to dispose of their waste in landfills.



Waste is a commodity and as such it can be transported into and out of the county for recycling, processing, and disposal and once the waste leaves county borders, the county's ability to regulate the material ceases. Because waste management decisions made by Washington County residents, businesses and elected officials effect the business community and residential populations living in the county, neighboring communities, the state, and border states, where and how county wastes are managed is of significant concern to the

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Department. This problem is not unique to the county but is also of national concern. Washington County is a member of the Metropolitan Regional Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board (SWMCB), a regional joint powers solid waste planning board and the county's main forum for addressing regional solid waste management policy and planning issues.

Washington County is geographically and geologically unique. Sharing a border with the State of Wisconsin, the decisions of where and how county waste is managed are significantly affected by the regulations and policies there. Because there are no regulations requiring county waste to be delivered or managed at a specific facility or in a particular manner, county waste may be collected and transported to a facility of the hauler's choosing, including facilities outside of Minnesota. The close proximity of the county to Wisconsin and the differences in regulatory requirements and economics of land disposal there are causing county waste to be transported and deposited in landfills in Wisconsin. Disposal of waste in landfills provides less environmental protection than management of waste in the county's integrated waste management system. This system favors waste reduction, reuse, recycling, composting, and waste-to-energy options over landfilling.

Washington County currently has no landfills for disposal of residential and commercial solid waste. The county is also home to the first permitted solid waste land disposal site in Minnesota, Lake Jane landfill in Lake Elmo. The Lake Jane Landfill has been closed for more than thirty years. Since closing, the site and land surrounding it have experienced ground water contamination resulting from materials disposed of in the landfill. Frequent reports of pollution caused by land disposal sites in the county has made residents more aware of problems caused by waste disposal on the land. Since 1987, the county has enacted policies that support managing waste in an integrated system that includes waste reduction and reuse, recycling, and resource recovery through processing at the Newport Resource Recovery Facility. Since 1987, more than 1.35 million tons of waste has been processed into Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) that is burned to generate electricity. However, the county's efforts have not resulted in sustained increases in recycling rates, reductions in waste generation volumes, or the voluntary management of county waste by environmentally preferred methods.

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Community Feedback

Community feedback included a wide range of comments on waste management and environmental health issues, including concern over air quality, water quality, waste management and recycling. Many respondents provided additional waste management-related feedback with answers to specific environmental health questions, in open comment sections of the surveys, and verbally.

Responses to the department's on-line survey revealed that:

- ◆ 83% of respondents viewed proper handling of solid and hazardous wastes an issue of *major concern* or of *some concern*.
- ◆ 70% of respondents thought garbage and recycling services were of *major concern* or of *some concern*.
- ◆ 84% thought public health nuisances (garbage, animal, hazardous waste) were of *major concern* or of *some concern*.

Additional solid waste-related responses, although less prominent than those above, included concern over the amount of waste generated by residents, the safety of landfill containment, prevalence of public littering, and desire to recycle more plastics.

Responses to the 2008 Washington County Residential Survey indicated that 17% had a major concern about the proper disposal of garbage and 27% had a moderate concern.

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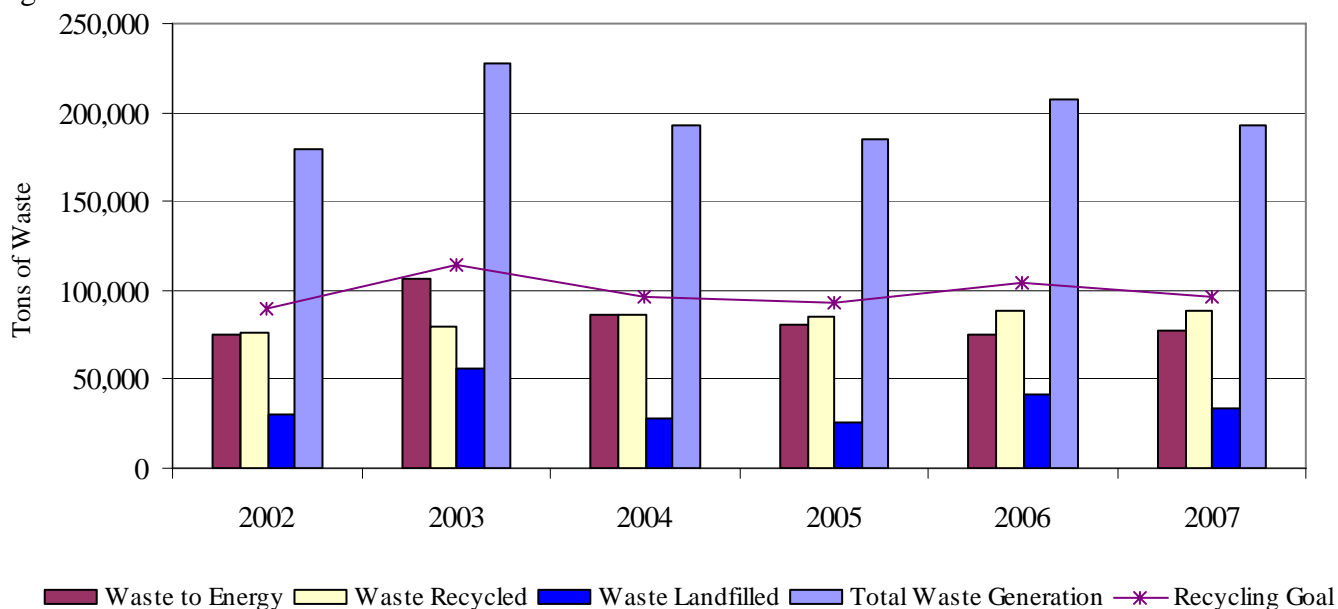
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Key Data

Waste Management Methods, Washington County, 2002-2007

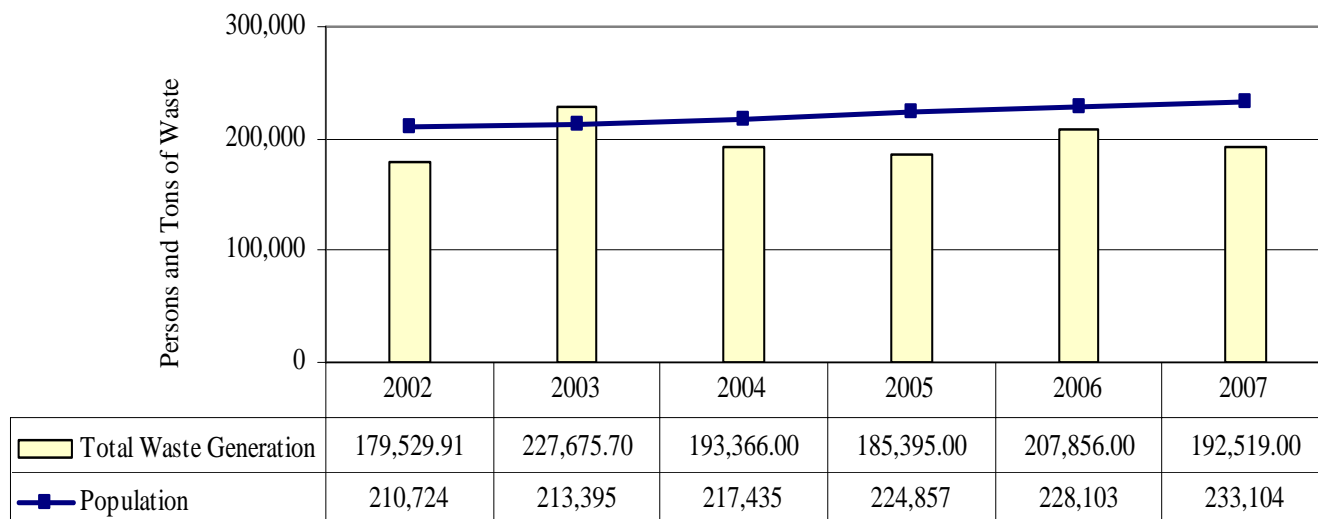
Figure 1.



Source: Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment. From 2002 to present, the county recycling rate has fallen below the recycling goal of 50% of total waste generated.

Figure 2.

Total Waste Generated and Population, Washington County, 2002-2007



Source: Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment. Since 2002, county per-capita waste generation has been keeping pace with population growth of two percent annually.

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Community Assets

- ◆ Delegated authority to the county by state law to plan for the management of solid waste
- ◆ Washington County's Solid Waste Master Plan which includes policies and goals to:
 - ◆ reduce the toxicity of waste in the county
 - ◆ support processing of waste into energy or by composting
 - ◆ regulate waste activities in the county
 - ◆ educate on waste reduction, reuse, and recycling
- ◆ Regional Solid Waste Master Plan, developed by the Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board (SWMCB)
- ◆ The County Environmental Charge which supports county efforts to promote recycling, reducing waste and protecting soil and water against waste contamination
- ◆ Recycling services offered by cities
- ◆ Washington County Household Hazardous Waste Facility

Community Gaps and Risks

- ◆ Nearly all of the county's waste is collected and transported by private companies who make decisions on where and how the waste is managed. Because the actual method of managing waste is beyond the public view, this "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" nature of the collection and transportation of waste, there is a significant gap in the knowledge of county residents regarding waste management.
- ◆ The amount of county waste being managed by resource recovery continues to decrease and the amount of waste being landfilled continues to increase.
- ◆ County residents and businesses are at greater risk for financial and environmental liability due to pollution caused by more of the county's waste disposed in landfills.

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Summary

Over the last five years the amount of solid waste generated in Washington County has increased on average 2% annually, the same level as the residential population increase. During this period, county waste has been managed by a variety of methods including landfilling, processing into waste-to-energy, re-use and recycling. Over the last five years, the amount of waste recycled initially increased on average of three percent per year but the recycling rate has stagnated and from 2004-2005 it decreased slightly. From 2005 to 2007, the amount of county waste processed for waste-to-energy has decreased 4% annually while the amount landfilled has increased 11% on average.

The county has developed and implemented detailed plans, with the goal of preferentially managing solid waste by reuse, recycling, and waste to energy where possible. Recycling and waste to energy has not been keeping pace with increases in waste generation. Recycling rates are stagnant and at risk of decline. More waste is being landfilled, less waste is being processed into waste-to-energy (the preferred management option). If the trend continued, county residents are at risk for increased environmental and financial liability for landfilled waste, increased costs associated with transportation and disposal, and failure to meet the county's Solid Waste Master Plan goals.

To address these issues, the county should evaluate the current system, identify the reasons for waste management trends and develop strategies for addressing the problem. Beginning in 2009, the Department of Public Health and Environment will begin revising the county's Solid Waste Master Plan. Prior to and during the 2009 Solid Waste Master Plan revision, the county should identify and consider all available options including incentives, policies, and regulations to address the identified waste management problems.

Sources

² Minnesota law describes a hierarchy for various solid waste management practices. To the extent practicable, solid waste is to be managed as high on the hierarchy as possible. The waste management practices listed in the statute, in order of preference, are: waste reduction and reuse, waste recycling, composting of yard waste and food waste, resource recovery through composting or incineration, and land disposal.

³ Washington County Metro Certification Reports, 2003-2007

⁴ See Water Quality section.

Glossary

¹ Waste to energy is the processing of mixed waste into a fuel used for the generation of electricity.