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Make it Right to Begin With

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"They're baaaaack!"

Not Freddy Krueger's extended family of ghouls, but our very own Moving Students. Thousands of them, making their yearly migration from one run-down apartment to the next, in Madison's annual mid- August musical chairs of off-campus housing.

You know them by their droppings - cardboard boxes and cast-off sofas, lava lamps and electric clocks and bent-up dish drainers - a fantastic amount of garbage that fills our municipal sidewalks each year, reminding us of summer's inevitable sad passing and adding 700 to 900 tons to the city's weekly trash haul.

That's a lot of garbage. But nothing, of course, next to the more than 10 million tons of non-sewage solid waste the rest of us, joined by neighbors from other states, dump in Wisconsin landfills each year. Most of this is supplied by Wisconsin industry - about 6.5 million tons annually. At the rate it's going, the state's landfill capacity will be exhausted in five years.

Then where will we put it all?

Just build more dumps? Or maybe convert Miller Park to another landfill, with luxury boxes and all?

Not likely, at least the latter.

Well, maybe we could try to ship it to other states, repaying their current favor to us. Wisconsin has become a sort of dumping ground for the Midwest, since our "tipping fees" on garbage disposal have long been so much lower than elsewhere.

This last is being remedied, sort of, by legislation now on Governor McCallum's desk. Introduced by Rep. Spencer Black, D- Madison, it raises the state fee charged per ton of solid waste dumped here from 30 cents to \$3 - a little discouragement to dumping more. This is a small share of the total costs and charges involved in picking up and dumping garbage, and will still leave Wisconsin dumps a bargain for those looking to fill them. But the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce - whose positions this budget session have been so extreme that the organization risks morphing into a caricature of itself - strongly opposes the increase as insupportably devastating to our economy, rather than mildly helpful to our environment, and is calling on the governor to veto it. WMC should be laughed at - and you might tell your governor to sign the legislation.

But, getting back to the ship-it-out-of-state option on garbage ... unfortunately it's really not there, since other people don't like stinking garbage any more than we do, and other states' landfill capacity is dwindling too. So we can push garbage around a bit, but we're still going to have to live here with most of what we make here.

Then there's recycling, which we already do with another 3.7 million tons of garbage each year - a state recycling effort that's considered among the best in the nation. Wisconsin is a national leader in curbside recycling of newspapers, bottles, cans and other recyclables, and our overall rate of recycling 36 percent of recyclables is one-third higher than the national average. This, too, is a perennial focus of WMC attack, but it is very popular with residents. A DNR survey in 1998 showed that 98 percent of households and small apartment complex dwellers participate in some type of recycling program, while 91 percent of large apartment complex dwellers admit to recycling. When these curbside recycling programs began in the early 1990s, 57 percent of residents polled felt "strongly committed" to recycling. In 1998 the figure had grown to 75 percent, with 96 percent believing their recycling efforts are "worthwhile." You can't get a much higher vote of public confidence than that, and this might be harnessed to drive that 36 percent figure higher. Maybe with a little more effort and ingenuity, we could get to the point that 50, or even 60, percent of our residentially consumed recyclables were in fact recycled.

But there are definitely diminishing returns to this as an overall garbage strategy, for two basic reasons.

One is that individual residents are not the main producers of garbage; business is, and business recycles at a much lower rate than do residents. Until business stops generating as much waste as it does, those landfills will just continue to fill up, leach into the groundwater and eventually poison all of us. So more policy should be directed to discouraging business dumping in the first place, and to increasing its recycling share. At present, state taxes on disposal of industrial waste are capped for individual firms - after a certain point, it's a free ride if you want to generate more of the stuff, which is hardly the sort of policy that's going to get the worst polluters to amend their ways. At present we also have very few serious incentives to get business to recycle at anywhere near the level that it could. We'll talk more about this next week.

But the real killer is this:

The problem with garbage doesn't start when some product has used up its usefulness, but when the product is made. If you fabricate something so that it can be recycled for a different use after its first use is ended, and you've got a way of doing that and a market for what results, you

basically don't have a garbage problem at all. Everything that's used gets reused, in an endlessly conserving cycle.

But of course, we don't do this obvious thing - which is technologically quite feasible - for most of the stuff that we make.

And that should be the real goal of policy - to get more things made "right" in the first place, or to force the costs of their cleanup back onto those who refuse to make them properly. In the trade, this is called encouraging "producer responsibility" - a notion so foreign to how we think about corporations that it takes some getting used to, but yields wonders once we do.

We could make those wonders in Wisconsin if we wanted to. It sure beats just putting out the trash.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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