

## "DON'T BAG IT" PROGRAM

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Basically, what the City of Sterling Heights did, through its Solid Waste Management Commission, was to look at how it could reduce the greatest percentage of the waste stream going to a landfill in the most economical manner. The greatest percentage of our waste stream, according to a 1987 Macomb County Solid Waste Stream Assessment, is . . . yard waste. It's estimated that 30% of the Macomb County residential waste stream was yard waste. The city disposes of approximately 193,000 cubic yards of residential waste per year. It was estimated that 23% of that was grass clippings, 5% leaves, and the remaining 2% brush and tree trimmings. Eliminating the grass clippings and leaves either from being collected or from being disposed of at a landfill would represent in the area of about 28% reduction of the total waste volume collected.

The city's Solid Waste Management Commission considered a separate collection of grass clippings and leaves to be diverted from a landfill and sent to a compost site. The Commission also looked at the reasons why we collect grass clippings and leaves to begin with and if the possibility existed for residents to manage their lawn debris in their own backyards. The city researched the efforts of Dr. Bill Knoop from the City of Fort Worth, Texas, who had begun a "Don't Bag It" lawn care plan in the summer of 1988. The "Don't Bag It" Plan educated homeowners that there is no reason to bag their clippings and that it was more beneficial to leave them on the lawn working for them.

City staff also researched the program in Madison, Wisconsin, where, in April of 1989, due to a landfill capacity crisis, they banned the collection of grass clippings and advised homeowners that they could either leave their clippings on their lawn, backyard compost, or bring their clippings to one of three designated drop off sites. More and more information existed from turfgrass experts like Dr. Paul Rieke of Michigan State University, and many others, that the most logical means to manage ones lawn debris was to leave it on the lawn. With this information as a background, the city's Solid Waste Commission began developing a yard waste reduction management disposal strategy to recommend to City Council. This proposal included providing a public education "Don't Bag It" lawn care information program advising residents that there is no scientific reason to collect clippings and that they could be cut and left on the lawn where they will decompose and provide nutrients to the lawn. The residents would be encouraged to manage all their lawn debris on their own property including leaves by providing education about back yard composting as another alternative. It was envisioned that this would be a year long public education process encouraging voluntary participation. The goal was that eventually the curbside collection of grass clippings and leaves would be discontinued as part of the normal refuse collection, with the alternatives being 1) leave the clippings on the lawn, and mulch and compost the leaves; and 2) residents would have the option to deliver their clippings and leaves to at least three drop off sites if they did not buy into the program.

The city began to publish the program in the city's newsletter of February 1990 explaining to the residents the benefits of leaving their clippings on the lawn, etc. In April of 1990, the city mailed out "Don't Bag It" brochures to every

mailing address in the city. Approximately 44,000 copies were mailed. The brochures explained the benefits of "Don't Bag It" concept and encouraged the residents to voluntarily participate in the program. City Council took action at their meeting of May 1, 1990 to approve the yard waste reduction, management, disposal strategy recommended by the Solid Waste Commission including, eventually, discontinuing curbside collection. In fact, the council requested that the City Attorney's Office look into developing an ordinance to incorporate the strategy, possibly as early as October 1, 1990.

The City of Sterling Heights summer newsletter of May, 1990, included a front page dealing with composting, the "Don't Bag It" program and recycling, which questioned the residents "Are you doing your part?" It is explained the evidence that grass clippings could be left and, in fact, should be left on the lawn and gave information on backyard composting. The articles also attempted to answer many of the common questions people would ask about the program such as "How do I adapt my mower to be able to mulch?", "Will grass clippings cause thatch in my Lawn?", etc.

The city got a lot of press coverage through this entire process and most of it was in a positive vein. Needless to say, city staff, City Council, and the Solid Waste Management Commission realized that this was a difficult program to sell in that we were dealing with changing deeply held beliefs about lawn care. Many people have been in the habit of collecting clippings all their lives and it is a difficult proposition to think that we can change those habits in a short period of time.

Throughout this process, city staff has spoken to homeowners and various school classes about the program. We also delivered "Don't Bag It" brochures to all the schools in Sterling Heights, both Utica Community Schools and Warren Consolidated, and the brochures were actually sent home with each and every elementary school student.

Also, we utilized our cable T.V. department and the weekly city news broadcasts throughout the months of April, May and June and included spots on the "Don't Bag It" program and hints to homeowners as to how they could successfully participate in the program. Letters were also sent in late April and early May to the various lawn equipment dealers in the area, Weingartz, Sears, K-Mart's, etc. who sell lawn care equipment, advising them of the city's "Don't Bag It" program and requesting them to stock deflector chutes and mulching kits for their lawn mowers in order that homeowners could adapt their existing lawnmowers and successfully participate in the program.

The city also co-sponsored a program with the Chamber of Commerce for the business community in April of 1990 on waste reduction and specifically introduced the "Don't Bag It" program to them.

We believe that we did get the message out and that many people are now leaving the grass clippings on the lawn as opposed to disposing of them at the curb. Lawn care dealers can testify to the fact that we had an impact in that discussions with many of them indicated that they sold out of their mulching kits, deflector chutes, and mulching mowers in a very short time after the city began promoting the program.

### WHERE ARE WE NOW

Needless to say, we think that to get people to accept the program, it is going to take a lot more education and no matter how hard you try, we are never going to get 75 or 80 percent participation in the program because many people, no matter what you tell them, believe the grass clippings should be picked up and not left on the lawn. We believe it has been probably one of the most controversial issues that the city ever had to deal with and the program, as far as banning the collection of grass clippings and leaves, is not going to happen at the present time.

City staff, and the Solid Waste Management Commission has been investigating the possibility of providing a separate collection of lawn debris, grass clippings and leaves, based on a user fee. Meaning that those who use the service would pay for the service and those who have taken the initiative to manage the grass clippings and leaves on their own property would pay nothing. Council has been considering that recommendation as well as considering the possibility of providing a separate curbside collection of grass clippings and leaves to be included in the city property taxes. If the council approves the separate collection, it is possible for that to begin with the city's next refuse collection contract on May 1, 1991. Staff, and the Solid Waste Management Commission would intend to continue the public education program regarding the managing of yard waste on one's own property. The Solid Waste Management Commission and staff have recommended that the separate collection be bid as a separate stand alone item in the refuse contract in order that the costs of the separate collection can be identified. In that way Council and the general public can easily see what the costs involved are and utilize that information in their future decision making.

We realize that composting costs at private compost facilities run about half the price of less than taking lawn debris to a landfill, so that the separate collection costs of sending another truck down the street on the regular refuse collection day would be offset by the avoided disposal costs of not sending the lawn debris to a landfill and, or course, we would have to use paper bags, biodegradable bags or separate cans for the collection.