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In Skowhegan, a glimpse at the future of solid waste recycling

Randall Gray's composting program may take 'baby steps,' but experts see it as a model for 21st Century environmental stewardship. It saves money, too.

By Steve Solloway

Randall Gray could say he saw the future of environmental protection a long time ago, but he's not an "I told you so" type of guy. He's the Solid Waste Supervisor and Code Enforcement Officer/Building Inspector for the Town of Skowhegan.

And in 2015, people in his field were talking about him. He introduced food scraps to the town's tree and yard waste-disposal process, making a richer compost that's finding people eager to take his product.

"We're not trying to reinvent the wheel," said Gray. "But I think for a town our size, we're a bit unique."

He grins, because at age 62, he never expected the mini-burst of attention he receives, which he deflects to his small staff. He won't call himself a steward of the land. That would be pretentious. "I love the environment," he said.

Gray remembers a day in 1988. He was a guest speaker on the rather dry subject of solid waste disposal and open landfills that still dotted Maine's landscape.

"It was a service organization. I can't remember if it was the Rotary or the Kiwanis. I told them that someday everything isn't going into the trash. It's going to stop, it has to stop. The open landfills we see in our towns will be closed.

"What are we going to do about it?"

In 1988, he was still relatively new to his jobs with the Town of Skowhegan. Some of his listeners scoffed at what they heard. Open landfills nearing capacity were a big city problem in over-developed states far from rural Maine. Or so they thought.

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Shown are Randall Gray, far right, and his Skowhegan colleagues. From left: Cynthia Kirk, James Travis and Wayne Householder. (Submitted photo)

"They didn't believe me," said Gray. "But really, who would back then? People looked around and said we have plenty of land."

A 21st Century priority

Now, climate change is a hot topic. So is the availability of clean drinking water and clean air. Environmental issues are no longer left to the scientists to discuss. People like Randy Gray and his staff are on the front lines.

Many men and women do Gray's job in other Maine towns and cities. Not all may have the enthusiasm that has infected the people working with them.

Gray is proud of the process and the product. He almost sounds like a maker of fine cheese. He's proud that he has helped saved Skowhegan taxpayers about \$15,000 in waste disposal costs. More importantly, he believes he's saved a piece of Skowhegan's fu-

ture, environmentally speaking.

He's old enough to have parents who were children during the Great Depression when, for many, recycling was a way of life. His father was one of 20 children in a family where the old saying of "waste not, want not" was a fact of life.

Gray grew up in Skowhegan, graduated from its high school and got his first real job working for the town. Other than a short stint of less than a year working for the City of Augusta, he hasn't really had another employer. After working with the community development program he moved to code enforcement.

"People ask, 'How I can enforce regulations in a town where I know everyone?' Well, if you have a problem, wouldn't you rather have someone who knows you than a complete outsider? I'm sure there are some who disagreed with me. But I think everyone

can look me in the eye. I can.”

He believed he could be both the code enforcement officer and the solid waste director. “I liked the idea that I could do something without having the word ‘enforcement’ used.”

Skowhegan had a longstanding recycling program of tree and yard waste to compost. A few years ago, the program was relocated within the town and Gray looked at it with fresh eyes. “I knew there was a better way to produce a better product. I knew we could go to (Maine’s Department of Environmental Protection) for advice and training.”

Gray went to the DEP’s composting school in Monmouth. More recently, two of his staff did the same. “I wanted them to know the reasons I was asking them to do this or that.”

If you’re a part of Gray’s team, he wants you invested in the game plan. That helps when you’re on the back-hoe in the spring, moving chicken manure into the mix knowing it will sweeten the process, so to speak, and help it cook better and faster. Gray believes in the KISS principle: Keep it simple, stupid. Micro-management

complicates too much.

“This is all about hands-on management. It’s what we do,” he said. “I don’t want to be a babysitter. If I communicate properly, I don’t need to be looking over their shoulders. I’m always available if someone needs me.”

Mark A. King, the director and an instructor at the DEP’s composting school, has worked with Gray for some 20 years, providing technical support. “Randy is one of the most

conscientious, compassionate people on the planet,” said King. “He’s one of the lone soldiers for composting (in Maine.)

‘Baby steps’

“He made me promise we were not going to take the town by storm with this. We would take baby steps. He wanted to show people how this would work and let word of mouth help it grow. He doesn’t force people to do

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something. He wants people to enjoy being part of this.”

George MacDonald, the Maine DEP’s Director of Sustainability, has known Gray for 15 years. “Randy sets goals and acts on them. He asks himself, ‘How can I do better?’ He’s willing to try things and he’ll do it first on a small scale. (If he needs funding) he’s quite resourceful in finding it.”

Perhaps more importantly, Gray understands people, said MacDonald

During the past year, as Skowhegan’s compost program attracted attention, Gray deflected the attention aimed at him. His staff bought into what he was selling. Their extra effort has made the program work, not one man.

Recently, Gray’s administrative assistant, Cynthia Kirk, came into his office while he was talking to hand him paperwork. Kirk turned to his visitor: “Tell him he can’t retire,” she said. “We can’t lose him.”

Simply put, Gray loves his job, his staff, and the town. They’re all his second family. His job descriptions indicate that his working hours are mostly 8 to 5. “I’m no different than anyone else. I like to go home at the end of the day, sit in my chair and watch television.”

Until the phone rings.

His adult children live elsewhere in the country and Gray visits them when he can. He’s interested in sports in general and especially NASCAR. He was a big fan of Ricky Craven when the native of Newburgh raced on NASCAR’s elite stock car series. Now Gray is a fan of Craven, the NASCAR analyst for ESPN.

Mostly, Gray loses himself in his free hours beside his home work bench. The blanket chests and bed headboards and other things that he crafts from wood are prized gifts. Just don’t set a deadline for their completion. “I always tell that to people but then I get the phone call. ‘It will be done for Christmas, won’t it?’ ”

By the numbers

He’s 62 and he knows he will walk away at some point. Right now, he has work to do for his town. Some 35 households are committed to the food waste recycling program. There are about 5,000 households in Skowhegan. Gray said he’s not discouraged by the low percentage.

“I can’t worry about the people who won’t. It’s all about the people who will. We have an open house with the DEP every year. It’s all about awareness, education and effort. We’re taking baby steps and that’s OK. I don’t want this to grow too fast, have something go awry and then wonder if we can get it back on track.”

In 2016 he hopes to add a local restaurant’s food scraps to the process and see how that works before thinking of expanding the composting process.

“The idea is to save the town money. I’m not going to the taxpayers asking for more. You know the saying, if you build it, they will come? My version is, if you make it, they will take it. What

we’re doing is good for the taxpayers and it’s good for the environment.

“I’m very proud of my time here. I’ll retire with my head held high. I’m proud of the way I’ve dealt with the taxpayers and my town managers, and I’ve worked for six. I’ve been the guy that just stuck around. It was all on-the-job training.

“I was fortunate. I was in the right town. It was the right fit.”

He walks out of his office in Skowhegan’s grand old municipal building, completed in 1909. “Have you seen our renovated opera house? It’s right upstairs on the second floor. Take a look.”

Gray’s pride and his love for his town was showing again. ■

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