

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
Citizen Focus Groups to Identify Barriers to Reducing Waste**

**prepared for:
The Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board (SWMCB)**

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The purpose of this summary is to report findings to the Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board (SWMCB) on the recently conducted focus groups which were held among the citizens of the six country metropolitan area to solicit their input for overcoming the barriers which prevent them from reducing the amount of waste they generate.

Background & Objective

The Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board (SWMCB) has set as an outcome in its Regional Solid Waste Management Master Plan the reduction of 235,000 tons of MSW per year by 2003 in the metropolitan area that includes Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey and Washington counties.

The purpose of the research conducted here was to identify and examine barriers which prevent people from reducing waste and, once identified, to develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

The information received will help develop recommendations of how waste reduction messages need to be presented and what, if anything, government can do to remove barriers to reducing waste.

Methodology

Three focus groups were conducted on Thursday evening, November 15, 2000 at Focus Market Research, Bloomington. Potential participants were asked about their level of concern with environmental issues, using a 10-point scale in which "1" meant they were not at all interested and "10" meant they were very interested. To qualify, every participant had to rate himself/herself between 3-8.

Each group was divided by age, such that:

- Group One: 46 – 60 Year Olds
- Group Two: 35 – 45 Year Olds
- Group Three: 23 – 34 Year Olds.

In addition, the composition of the group had to include:

1. A good mix of educational levels from high school graduates through individuals with graduate degrees.
2. Representation from non-Caucasian ethnic groups.
3. A good mix of females and males.

This is qualitative, not quantitative, research. The information reported herein represents the in depth feelings of a select group of participants. The findings deal more with opinions and feelings, rather than cold, hard data. During the discussions, participants not only revealed what they felt, but *why* they felt the way they did. The information is *not* statistically projectable. However, it contains valuable insight and direction for the SWMCB as it deals with the issues investigated here.

SUMMARY

The discussion was spirited in all three groups. We learned that there are some waste reduction activities that individual respondents are *never* going to perform. However, after discussing the activities in the group, some reluctant respondents were more willing to perform the activity once they heard other respondents' rationale. Encouraging some waste reduction actions may be easier than expected, especially among younger citizens, since they themselves admitted that they did not perform some activities simply because they were not aware of them. All three groups suggested more awareness building and education is necessary to overcome barriers to waste reduction.

DETAILED FINDINGS

1. Grouped by age, **as the groups got older, they tended to perform *more* waste reduction activities.** (See Garbage Reduction Worksheet, page 5). For example, 46-60 Year Olds had performed 9.9 waste reduction activities during the past year; 35-45 Year Olds had performed 6.7 activities (which would have been much higher, but one participant had only performed two activities); 23-34 Year Olds had only performed 6.3 activities. At the same time, on the issue of waste reduction, the 46-60 Year Olds remembered when things were “different.” One participant remarked, “*There was just an anniversary which just occurred – was it the 25th or the 30th? – anniversary of Earth Day.... If you had a room of 40 year olds, they wouldn't know what Earth Day is.*” A second participant observed, “*My kids seem to have less knowledge of recycling than I do.*” The 35-45 Year Olds were too busy, too hassled to care. The 23-34 Year Olds were seemingly unaware of the problem and what they could do.
2. A tally of responses on the Garbage Reduction Worksheet (page 5) indicates that **the one activity most participants performed “often” was “Used a reusable mug” (by 21 of the 30 participants).** Participants commented about how easy this was, “*I just bought a Tupperware Sipper that I use all the time.* Others pointed out that it was also economical: “*Coffee is cheaper. You get 32 ounces for the price of 16 if you have your own mug.*” “Printing and copying on both sides of a sheet of paper” and “Composted grass and leaves in my yard or taken them to a compost site” were also both performed “often.”
3. **At the other extreme, nobody – not one participant -- had “Often/Seldom” “Called a manufacturer’s 800-number on the package and voiced concerns about product packaging.”** Essentially, they felt that this was a meaningless

exercise, a waste of their time: *“I would think that my voice doesn’t count. They don’t have time to hear me.”* Only three participants (all 46-60 Years Old) had “often” “Reduced excess junk paper and mail by actually calling and writing companies and asking them to remove my name from your lists.” In fact, many participants had moved to the point where the behavior now was simply tossing their junk mail: *“I just bring it in and throw it away. And be done with it.”*

4. **Participants were also asked to rank the activities by how likely they would be to perform them.** Among the 35-45 Year Olds, “Printing and copying on both sides of a sheet of paper” was ranked as one of the top four activities that they would be “most likely” to perform. The 35-45 Year Olds tended to spread their “top four” activities among several behaviors. On the other hand, 23-34 Year Olds claimed that they would be “most likely” to perform the following activities: “Purchase products made from recycled paper, such as greeting cards, stationery and paper towels,” “Purchase used merchandise such as clothing, sporting goods, furniture or other items,” and “Compost grass and leaves in my yard or take them to a compost site.” Unfortunately, due to time limitations, this was not done among the 46-60 Year Olds.
5. **The activities that participants would be least likely to perform included,** “Calling a manufacturer’s 800-number on the package and voice concerns about product packaging,” Most respondents felt that, *“I don’t think you’re going to get results on anything. I don’t think one customer’s voice is going to have a company change the way they package.”* At the same time, a surprising number of participants just flatly stated that, *“I don’t like talking on the phone.”* Other unpopular activities included, “Taking my own cloth bag(s) to the store so that I don’t need to use their ‘paper or plastic’,” and “Composting fruit and vegetable leftovers with my yard waste in my yard.” However, after the group discussed composting fruit and vegetable leftovers, they were more receptive to it. In contrast, even after a group discussion, they were still not very receptive to calling a manufacturer's 800-number.
6. **There were several activities which had not been performed by 23 – 34 Year Old participants because they had not thought of them.** For example, even such an “unpopular” activity as, “Taking my own cloth bag(s),” was met with comments like, *“They should encourage that. I never thought to do that. If they put up a sign at the register that said, ‘Please reuse your bags,’ I’d probably do it.”* In fact, they first became aware of the activity when they read the worksheet! Another example, when exposed to the idea of calling a manufacturer, one woman remarked, *“I’ll probably do it now.”* Obviously, this seems to indicate that the material which is being sent out is not reaching some targets. Ironically, every participant who was asked *did* claim to have received mailings.
7. **Participants wanted facts and numbers before they were willing to act.** At the same time, they’re not interested in reading complicated, detailed explanations; they want to be told what to do in the simplest possible format. They want the facts explained very simplistically, very visually, in “sound bites.” One participant stated, *“In easy to understand jargon. Some people don’t get the “20%.” “Twenty percent” of what? Twenty percent of a tree? Have it in more understandable-----. Just little,*

quick blurbs. Another recommended strategy was tying all messages back to the individual: *“Somehow, find a way to have these messages hit home. Tie it to the household. Tie it to the individual.”*

8. **So what *are* the barriers to reducing waste?** The reasons are as varied and unique as the participants themselves. A list of behaviors and the barriers they face is detailed on Table 2: Citizens’ Barriers to Reducing Waste, Page 7. After teaming with one or more participants, those same participants offered solutions to overcoming those same barriers. Those solutions are detailed on Table 3: Citizens Solutions to Reducing Waste, Page 8.
9. Interestingly, for some behaviors – like composting, for example -- **once participants came to understand and were able to ask about specific details about the activity, they were receptive to trying them.** One compost convert, concerned about the smell, noted, *“Well, then I would like it. Because I like the smell of the fresh soil, back dirt.”* On the other hand, there were some behaviors that the individual respondent just would never do, while others would do – like taking a cloth bag to the grocery store or buying used items. General assessment: *“It’s a matter of personal choice.”*
10. **How can those barriers be overcome?** Participants were also asked to come up with ideas to overcome these barriers, detailed on Table 3: Citizens’ Solutions to Reducing Waste, Page 8. “Economics” was not a “big deal,” especially among the 23-34 Year Olds. Their incentives included, *“Convenience. I’m not going to drive 10 miles each direction to save four bucks if it’s an item like a CD or something like that. It needs to be more convenient. Closer.”* On the other hand, economic incentives *were* attractive to the 35-45 Year Olds. In fact, on several items, from “Purchasing used merchandise” to “Bringing your own bag,” participants stated that money would be a powerful motivator: *“If the store gave me some sort of incentive to do that, I’d probably do it. Like money off. Say, 5% if I use their bags again.”*
11. **Respondents suggested more awareness building and education is necessary to overcoming barriers to waste reduction.** *“I think the biggest factor is that it hasn’t been communicated to us as a disposable American community that this is important enough.”* Also, **the “waste reduction” message has to be constant.** *“I think (you must) continuously encourage waste reduction.... And after awhile it really becomes second nature. But again you really need to have the mechanism to start earlier in putting the process together.”* **The waste reduction messages need to be specific.** *“I don’t know if you are going to get a lot of people that will call up and say, ‘I don’t like your packaging.’ But, if they heard it on television or they read ads on it and it was hammered into their heads... ‘Do what you can to not buy products or complain about products that have excess packaging.’ You have to have consumer awareness.”*
12. Along with trying to build awareness among consumers, another strategy worth considering may be focusing upon a “higher channel.” **In other words, go to retailers and manufacturers and encourage *them* to target waste reduction messages to consumers.** For example, *“You could take a big company like Target*

Stores. And if they wanted to get behind it, they could really reduce the amount of waste that is going in and out of that store.” Many of the suggestions to overcoming barriers to waste reduction activities need to be carried out at the retailer or manufacturer level. For example, when discussing purchasing the right amount of paint, one respondent said, “We think the paint stores should have a computerized screen where you can put your room dimensions and it automatically gives you an estimate of the quantity of paint you are going to need.” Another example, a respondent when discussing reusing shopping bags said "If they put a sign up at the register that said, 'Please reuse your bags', I'd probably do it!”

TABLE 1: GARBAGE REDUCTION WORKSHEET

FIRST ROW: 46 – 60 YR OLDS (n = 10)* SECOND ROW: 35 – 45 YR OLDS (n = 10)* THIRD ROW: 23-34 YR OLDS (n = 10)	DONE IN PAST YEAR	FREQ OF DOING EACH ACTIVITY			RANKING BY MOST LIKELY		
		Oft	Som	Sel	1-4	5-9	10-13
Purchased used merchandise such as clothing, sporting goods, furniture or other items.	8	2	5	3	NA	NA	NA
	5	2	3	5	3	4	2
	8	2	3	5	7	1	2
Purchased products made from recycled paper, such as greeting cards, stationery and paper towels.	10	5	5	0	NA	NA	NA
	8	3	5	2	3	5	1
	10	4	5	1	8	2	0
Avoided buying single use items like paper and plastic plates, cups and disposable silverware.	8	4	3	3	NA	NA	NA
	5	1	4	5	2	6	1
	5	2	1	7	0	10	0
Reduced excess paper and junk mail by actually calling and writing companies and asking them to remove your name from their lists.	6	3	3	4	NA	NA	NA
	2	0	2	8	0	4	5
	2	0	0	10	0	6	4
Taken your own cloth bag(s) to the store so that you don't need to use their "paper or plastic."	4	0	2	8	NA	NA	NA
	0	0	1	9	0	4	5
	0	1	0	9	0	2	8
Printed and copied on both sides of a sheet of paper.	10	7	3	0	NA	NA	NA
	6	5	3	2	6	2	1
	7	4	2	4	5	4	1
Composted grass and leaves in my yard or taken them to a compost site.	8	7	0	3	NA	NA	NA
	5	4	3	3	5	2	2
	7	5	1	4	7	0	3
Composted fruit and vegetable leftovers with my yard waste in my yard.	8	3	2	5	NA	NA	NA
	2	1	0	9	0	4	5
	2	0	1	9	2	0	7
Carefully measured areas to be painted so that you only purchase the exact amount of paint needed.	7	4	3	3	NA	NA	NA
	4	2	4	4	2	6	1
	4	0	0	10	0	4	6
Bought products in bulk containers and concentrates with less packaging – such as juices and drinks in con form, rather than ready-to-use half gal/gal cons.	9	4	1	5	NA	NA	NA
	5	5	1	4	5	3	1
	7	2	4	4	4	5	1
Called a manufacturer's 800-number on the package and voiced your concerns about product packaging.	2	0	0	10	NA	NA	NA
	0	0	0	10	1	0	8
	0	0	0	10	0	4	6
Used a reusable mug.	10	7	3	0	NA	NA	NA
	7	8	0	2	4	4	1
	9	6	1	3	4	5	1
Bought reusable/refillable containers (e.g., milk jugs)	9	4	4	2	NA	NA	NA
	3	2	3	5	1	4	4
	2	1	1	8	2	7	1
MEAN NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES	9.9						
	6.7						
	6.3						

*"RANKING BY MOST LIKELY" not done in Group 1 and by one participant in Group 2.
Darkened boxes represent statistical significance.

TABLE 2: CITIZENS' BARRIERS TO REDUCING WASTE

In their own words.

Purchased used merchandise such as clothing, sporting goods, furniture or other items.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's not that I have anything against it, it's just that we have so much of the stuff now. The last thing we need is more used clothing!</i> • <i>I don't know what they did on that furniture.</i>
Purchased products made from recycled paper, such as greeting cards, stationery and paper towels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sometimes when you buy the recycled cards and stuff, the price is not that much different.</i> • <i>I really don't like the recycled paper that you write on. It's gray with the little wood chips in there. And I feel like it's kind of thin. My thing was quality and appearance.</i>
Avoided buying single use items like paper and plastic plates, cups and disposable silverware.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can't put my dishes in my microwave. I don't have that much space. I just use paper.</i> • <i>I do some for parties, just because of the quantities.</i> • <i>We're saving water because we're not washing as much.</i> • <i>I use paper because I feel it's cleaner than using a rack continuously because that causes a lot of germs.</i>
Reduced junk mail by calling and asking them to remove your name.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>There's a number you can call...I can't remember exactly what it was.</i>
Taken your own cloth bag(s) to the store so that you don't need to use their "paper or plastic."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I have thought about that – taking a cloth bag, but you think of "bag ladies" or little old ladies going to the store.</i> • <i>I don't want my eggs broken with a reused bag on the way home.</i>
Printed and copied on both sides of a sheet of paper.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A lot of the things that I made up for presentations, very seldom do you use both sides. It just wasn't cool.</i> • <i>When you print on both sides, it shows through sometimes.</i>
Composted grass and leaves in my yard or taken them to a compost site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's too much work.</i> • <i>Plus, having to drive these leaves and then having to pay per bag to toss these leaves.</i>
Composted fruit and vegetable leftovers with my yard waste in my yard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No way. That attracts animals.</i> • <i>I absolutely won't do bags. It turns strange colors. You grow mushrooms. I'm not up for science experiments.</i>
Carefully measured areas to be painted so that you only purchase the exact amount of paint needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I've always lived in an apartment.</i> • <i>But the paint manufacturers don't offer anything between a gallon and a quart.</i>
Bought products in bulk containers and concentrates with less packaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The kids and their juice boxes. That's a cool thing.</i> • <i>We bought this bulk toilet paper. It was a pain to store it.</i>
Called a manufacturer's 800-number on the package and voiced your concerns about product packaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>That's just like taking the bags back. It takes too much time.</i> • <i>I don't think one customer's voice is going to have a company change the way they package.</i> • <i>I think that part of it is that it's their product, not yours. So why should you really care?</i>
Used a reusable mug.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Convenience, basically, I guess. I don't have to worry about carrying around a mug that I have to keep.</i> • <i>I'm a student. I don't have no where to put it.</i>
Bought reusable/refillable containers (e.g., milk jugs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I wouldn't buy reusable/refillable containers like milk jugs. I don't know. It's just a matter of how clean they are when you go to refill them</i>

TABLE 3: CITIZENS' SOLUTIONS TO REDUCING WASTE

In their own words.

Purchased used merchandise such as clothing, sporting goods, furniture or other items.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bigger price differences between the old and the new. And then, longer warranty that it would last longer.</i> • <i>If we knew the history of the item. How do we know what happened to it? Like, a used car, if you knew the history.</i> • <i>A warranty or some kind of guarantee that it will work.</i>
Purchased products made from recycled paper, such as greeting cards, stationery and paper towels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Let me know specific facts. If it's recycled paper towels, tell me how much land space has been saved, how much energy has been saved, tell me why I need to buy this over this.</i>
Avoided buying single use items like paper and plastic plates, cups and disposable silverware.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Make it too expensive. Make the products themselves biodegradable. And campaign to inform people that the single use items can be reused in different capacities.</i>
Reduced junk mail by calling and asking them to remove your name.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Give me the 800-number... I'll do it tomorrow.</i> • <i>If you could get companies to actually make it a requirement, to send out cards. With a little check spot that says, "Please remove my name from the list."</i>
Taken your own cloth bag(s) to the store so that you don't need to use their "paper or plastic."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Give me a percentage off on my groceries. Maybe miniscule, but something that I can see. You could tax on the paper or the plastic bag. You could make a universal attractive logo bag. And it has to be cool, so that you'd want to be seen with Rainbow's bag, Target's bag.</i>
Printed and copied on both sides of a sheet of paper.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When you print on both side, it shows through sometimes. Maybe making thicker paper.</i> • <i>There are a lot of people that will screw up the paper and throw it in the garbage. Make people aware: Reduce, reuse.</i>
Composted grass and leaves in my yard or taken them to a compost site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Carver County sold them to the residents for five bucks. They're normally \$30. Provide the people with the proper compost bin and I think a lot of people will use them.</i>
Composted fruit and vegetable leftovers with my yard waste in my yard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Education. I went to a class, if you put meat or bones or any meat products, it will attract animals. But the fruits and vegetables don't.</i>
Carefully measured areas to be painted so that you only purchase the exact amount of paint needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Paint stores should have a computerized screen where you can put in your room dimensions and it automatically gives you an estimate of the quantity of paint you need. Number two, the paint store should allow you to return your unused paint with a percentage off on your next purchase.</i>
Bought products in bulk containers and concentrates with less packaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's like now they make a super megapack of diapers and they have a handle or something on it. Then, I'll buy that. But if it's something you can't carry or can't easily pick up or move in your car, then I don't want to buy it.</i>
Called a manufacturer's 800-number and voiced concerns about packaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Some kind of consumer awareness campaign, that's either publicly funded or funded by some type of organization.</i> • <i>There are other ways to communicate with the company besides calling a 1-800 number. Like an e-mail message.</i>
Used a reusable mug.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Increase the incentives on the content. Coffee is cheaper. You get 32 oz. for the price of 16 if you have your own mug..</i>

Continued - TABLE 3: CITIZENS' SOLUTIONS TO REDUCING WASTE

<p>Bought reusable/refillable containers (e.g., milk jugs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Have some well know person, say, "Let's do this. It's good for society." A rebate. Not just money back on the container, which you purchased, but, if you bring it back, we're going to give you something a little additional.</i>• <i>Advertise it's sanitary. Say "It's going to be heat-treated, completely sanitized, we completely guarantee it. Don't worry about it". Let everybody know.</i>
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