

Zero Waste

By Jasmine ShoShanna with help from Marjory Holder

There are solutions for our full landfills. Many sources say that 60-90% of our trash can be safely composted—all it takes are a few easy lifestyle changes.

When we buy products we can't compost, reuse, or recycle, we unravel the threads that make up the cloak of corporate environmental destruction. We must think differently about our trash, get groups who are already involved to change a few behaviors, live differently ourselves and get our communities to live differently.

For example, in September of 2005 the Watauga Democrat Party held a fundraiser and chose to do it "Zero Waste".

Here was our process:

1. Find a good composter.

We used Rock Water Farms (www.rockwaterfarms.com).

2. Pre-planning

Styrofoam and plastic are the main things that Jay Carter of Rock Water Farms cannot compost. We researched cornstarch utensils, but they were too costly.

Buying 300+ dishes was not possible at this time. Finally we decided to go with paper dishes, napkins, cups, and tablecloths which can be composted (there are issues in the making of paper products, toxins from bleaching and other issues). We were only able to take a few steps at a time and according to Jay, there are no toxic residues left after composting. We bought 300+ metal forks through ebay.

All the side dishes were supplied by volunteers. The pork came from a local farmer (so that we did not have to buy pork from the abusive Corporate World). Our Volunteer Coordinator called all food volunteers and educated them about Zero Waste and asked them to bring dishes in either recyclable containers or ones they would take back home again.

3. Day of the Event

1. We took away all trashcans that we were not going to use and had only one "trash" station. We had a bucket with water in it for forks and two large

trashcans for compostables. We had a "closed system" meaning we were in control of all food entering the area.

2. The kitchen/buffet line had a recycling trashcan. We did end up with a tiny 6 inch by 6 inch "landfill" trash bag of Saran Wrap and plastic wrappings and plastic tops to ice tea containers – it all fit into one plastic grocery bag.
3. Jay's truck was parked out back, easy access for us when we filled up "compost" bags (we used 7th generation recycled trash bags; we now have a source for compostable trash bags).
4. At the end of the evening we had: 14 bags of garbage to be composted that Jay hauled away; one tiny bag of trash for the landfill: a little bit of recyclable items (tinfoil, aluminum foil casserole pans, aluminum cans, and #1 and #2 plastic bottles) and a bucket of 200+ forks to be washed, which took one person about 20 minutes to wash.

It was amazingly easy. The only thing we would do differently is not have paper table cloths. Once they got messy they couldn't be wiped. Cloth or oilcloth tablecloths are possible solutions.

Result: We kept a great deal of trash out of the landfill and we got good media attention before and after the event. We educated a lot of people about trash.

We have an "open system" event in April and we can let you know how that goes. In an "open system" we won't get to zero waste though we can significantly minimize waste and educate people.

A personal story of minimizing waste

I also began experimenting in my own home. I changed my "open pile" compost where I only composted food in a "chicken wire" compost pile. Now I compost food and all paper including some cardboard that I tear up in small pieces.

I started looking at "source reduction" which means asking the question: 'what am I buying that I can't compost or recycle?' I buy as few items as possible that have to be thrown away. I notice the primary things in my trash are wrappings from food items, some plastic food containers (we only recycle 1 and 2 here), and once in a while other items like really old worn out sneakers, toothbrushes, and worn out pens. It is interesting to notice and think about what it is that I send

to landfills. I used to have about 1 medium "tall kitchen" trash bag a week. Now I have about 1 medium trash bag every 6 weeks.

There are some factors that make it easier for me to have less trash:

1. I grow and preserve a fair bit of my own food, and therefore eliminate much packaging and recycling.
2. I live simply. I don't consume much.
3. I heat with wood and can burn much of my paper trash (we get a lot of paper trash from mailings, and office work) in winter when my compost pile is not as active.
4. I pay attention to what I purchase and make decisions about whether it is worth sending the packaging to the landfill.

*Note a common misconception is that meat cannot be composted. Meat can be composted.

**I have been to Rock Water Farms. From an ordinary person's view, I was surprised at how natural it was. It basically looked like huge mounds of rich, black dirt packed down with some sawdust on it. There was green growing everywhere, and there was only a tiny, faint smell that I could detect. I would have this in my back yard. In fact I wish I did have a lot more of his compost in my yard and garden.

*** New Zealand is a leader in the movement toward Zero Waste. They have models we can follow. Germany also has "End of Life" laws, meaning that producers of products must be responsible for the product's "end of life" and either recycle it, or pay to have the product disposed of.

One final note: Our mindset is on Development and Consumption. We must change these thoughts. We are running out of room to develop, and consumption is taking a heavy toll on the health of the planet and ourselves. When people ask about jobs and what the construction industry will do without development, the answer is easy: we can switch our focus to the "Zero Waste Industry"; we can create "Resource Recovery Centers"; and many jobs exist in a new economy based on protecting our resources instead of creating toxic regional landfills and mega-shipping centers for trash. Locally we can all compost, recycle and create an economy around recovering our resources.