

Comments on the Warren County Draft Local Solid Waste Management Plan for 2019-2028 and a ZERO WASTE Vision, 7-20-20

The recently completed Warren County 2019-2028 Local Solid Waste Management Draft Plan (Draft Plan) does not reflect the principles and practice of Zero Waste, an approach that is gaining momentum across the country as well as worldwide. The Draft Plan uses a linear waste management model based on incineration and landfilling, rather than promoting waste prevention, energy saving, and resource reutilization. In other words, the Draft Plan mostly focuses on continuing to destroy large quantities of valuable materials in the waste stream, rather than thoughtful purchases, recycling, and reuse for the benefit of the county. If not revised, this Plan presents an enormous missed opportunity. Warren County deserves better.

Zero Waste is the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health. It focuses on waste prevention and wise stewardship of the earth's rapidly declining resources. It embraces a new and healthy way of looking at our garbage. Municipal leadership, waste management laws and regulations, and forward-thinking Zero Waste projects can challenge the alarming costs of "just throwing things away" and take Warren County in the right direction.

The Value of ZERO WASTE

The Zero Waste Planning Committee believes that a Zero Waste future for Warren County is feasible and necessary. **The Zero Waste approach is less costly, stimulates job creation and economic growth, and is good for the environment and climate.** The emphasis on disposal in the current Draft Plan will take the County in a wrong direction again and will cost Warren County citizens millions of dollars. For the past thirty years valuable resources have gone up in smoke leaving behind toxic ash.

Our goal is to inspire the people and elected officials of Warren County to rethink the way we manage our materials. In 2010 the NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation released Beyond Waste, A Sustainable Materials Management Strategy for New York State (REDUCE-REUSE-RECYCLE-COMPOST), which laid out strategies for dramatically increasing the state's waste diversion rate. Warren County should be ready to join hundreds of other communities to plan and implement Zero Waste.

Job Creation and Economic Impact

By embracing the Zero Waste framework and facilitating waste diversion, Warren County can reduce costs to residents and businesses for recycling and waste disposal. Improved, expanded and new recycling, composting and reuse facilities, programs, and businesses will create more jobs, boost small business profits, and stimulate a new generation of home-grown entrepreneurs.

Typically, for every 10,000 tons of materials incinerated, one job is created. For every 10,000 tons of materials processed for recycling and composting, five to ten jobs are created: hundreds more jobs are created as processed materials are sent to agriculture and industry. Each step of processing waste, manufacturing goods, and selling the repurposed items adds value to these materials, which expands the Warren County employment and business tax base.

Successful Zero Waste Models

Cities, counties and many other political jurisdictions in the United States, Europe and Asia have demonstrated that it is feasible and beneficial to make substantial progress toward Zero Waste. Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle are examples of cities that, having embraced the goal of Zero Waste, now divert at least 70% of municipal solid waste for recycling and composting. Examples of such programs in New York State are many and include:

Composting:

Starting 11 years ago, the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency (UCRRA) initiated its own pilot project and went on to establish a successful and profitable composting operation. In 2019 UCRRA took in 4,000 tons of food waste and made 1,700 tons of finished compost, all of which they sold in bulk for \$30 a ton. UCRRA has generously offered to mentor Warren County in setting up a pilot composting program.

Organic matter is the single largest component of the waste stream, estimated to comprise between 35 and 40%. Foods discarded from households and businesses are valuable ingredients for making high quality soil amendments for which there is year-round demand in the county and region. Yet currently high-value food waste is co-mingled with residential and commercial garbage and sent to the aging Hudson Falls incinerator or a landfill. Most of the County's yard and tree waste is dumped or piled somewhere for passive decomposition, rather than being processed along with food scraps into "black gold". There was no mention, in the Draft Plan, of the NY State 2019 Food Donation and Food Scrap Recycling Law, which goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2022, and will mandate requiring large food producers to donate edible food scraps to local food pantries and send the excess to composting facilities if available within a 25-mile radius. The final Plan should recommend establishing such a facility in our region.

Reuse:

While reusable products only make up about 2 to 5% of the waste stream, they have the highest value of all components of our wastes, worth on average \$500 per ton when repaired or refurbished. Citizens can then buy good used products for pennies on the dollar. In *The Repair Revolution*, John Wackman and Elizabeth Knight document the thriving reuse sector of the Hudson Valley region. The book describes how to create reuse networks and participate in curb swaps, repair cafes and re-stores. It provides models for initiating reuse programs, with guidance on cooperative planning, marketing, and educational programs.

Finger Lakes ReUse is a thriving non-profit business in Ithaca started in 1995 with strong support from Tompkins County officials under the county Solid Waste Management Plan. In its first five years, it grew from 3 people at the onset to 14 entry-level jobs. Today it has 40 permanent employees, all paid a living wage, with 75% of its funding coming from sales. Besides two retail stores, it runs a job training program, an electronics center that repairs and resells items, a deconstruction service, and a weekly Fixers Collective (volunteers repairing small appliances, rewiring lamps, etc.). Finger Lakes ReUse is developing a template for helping other communities to develop similar reuse operations. This includes sharing its sources of funding and business planning resources.

Current Solid Waste Management in Warren County

At present, Warren County lacks a coordinated system for managing its waste. In regard to waste collection all the county's municipalities, garbage, and recyclables are collected curbside by dozens of private haulers. The only exception is Lake Luzerne where the village provides

curbside pickup. Only a few municipalities require hauler permits. One neighborhood may have four or five haulers picking up along the same street. Permits that are issued do not require any waste or recycling reporting, such as the amounts and destination of wastes and recyclables. In most towns, residents and businesses may take their own bagged garbage and separated recyclables to a publicly owned transfer station, but this option is greatly underutilized.

The Draft Plan points out that as there are no waste hauler reporting requirements, no baseline data exists. The Draft Plan recommends a hauler permit system that requires the reporting of solid waste handling data. Such data reporting would allow the county to establish a garbage surcharge as a funding mechanism for needed 21st century waste management programs. Warren County would provide the oversight of municipal hauler permitting and coordination and analysis of collected data.

Currently much of our local waste is incinerated at the costly and polluting Wheelabrator Hudson Falls, considered a “waste-to-energy” incinerator. However, the U.S. Energy Information Agency rates trash incineration as the least efficient and most economically costly way to generate electricity.

Local residents are concerned about the air pollution from Wheelabrator Hudson Falls, which has been identified as the worst air polluter in Warren and Washington counties. Total pollution from the Hudson Falls incinerator is greater than each of the other 9 incinerators in New York State, even though it is the smallest. The US EPA air emissions inventory shows that Wheelabrator Hudson Falls releases more lead per ton of waste burned than any other incinerator in the U.S. and the third highest amount of mercury per ton of waste burned. Warren County also has the dubious distinction of having the highest cancer rates in New York State.

Education and Goal Setting

The aim of the Zero Waste Planning Committee is to make the Zero Waste approach the norm for municipalities, school systems, businesses, institutions, and individuals. The Draft Plan does recommend education outreach (such as brochures, seminars, and websites) but does not specify what this education will consist of, who will deliver it, how it will be funded, how business people will be persuaded to attend seminars, and why the approach will be effective. And it does not recommend a recycling coordinator or educator to lead such an effort.

The Draft Plan fails to set any numerical goals for waste diversion. Limited reuse, and recycling actions are mentioned but no goals or oversight measures are described. **Without goals, we lack direction. We also need to measure our progress. If we do not measure it, we cannot manage waste diversion properly.**

An appropriate waste reduction/diversion from disposal goal for Warren County is 50% by 2025. The national recycling rate has been hovering around 35% on average for several decades. With improvement in the source-separation of recyclables (“single stream” recycling is the current system in Warren County, which has failed due to high rates of contamination) and the additional diversion of food waste (under the 2019 NYS Food Donation and Food Scrap Recycling Law diversion mandate), 50% is reasonable and achievable. **Goal setting coupled with education will be one driver of success.**

Steps to Success

The Zero Waste Planning Committee has been meeting for almost a year. It meets twice a month and sends monthly e-mail reports to the Warren County Supervisors and other interested officials and community leaders. Committee members research Zero Waste successes around the country and facilitate Zero Waste educational programs with guest presentations by leaders in the field such as the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency and Neil Seldman, founder of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance.

The Committee members as well as many others in Warren County support specific recommendations to the Warren County Supervisors, in hopes that many, especially the 50% waste diversion goal, will be added to the final Warren County Solid Waste Management Plan for 2019-2028:

- Set the ambitious yet realistic goal of 50% waste reduction and diversion by 2025. (The Draft Plan projects shockingly small waste reduction/diversion rates between 0 and 4 % annually.)
- Form a planning committee of municipal representatives, and citizen volunteers from the Zero Waste Planning Committee, to share action and education strategies to achieve the 50% waste reduction and diversion goal in five years. Bring in acknowledged Zero Waste experts to advise.
- Designate a Warren County Zero Waste Coordinator, a management position responsible for developing and implementing the initiatives needed to meet the 50% waste reduction/diversion goal.
- Establish a countywide waste hauler permit system that requires all haulers to report data quarterly about the organic and recyclable waste they collect (amounts, municipal origin, destinations) as proposed by the Draft Plan.
- Create an across-the-board hauler surcharge of \$10 per ton on garbage destined for disposal to be used for Zero Waste implementation.
- Explore the development of a dual-stream county-owned mini MRF (materials recovery facility), or small-scale processing facility that the private haulers could deliver the recyclables to for a reasonable fee.
- Adapt transfer stations for reuse by adding sorting centers for reusable and repairable items to be made available to the public at no cost as recommended in the draft Plan.
- Financially support (through grants) the development of a local non-profit reuse business dedicated to reuse/repair and job training in order to jumpstart the reuse sector and bring hard-to-employ people into the job market earning a living wage.
- Consider using bonds to capitalize new Zero Waste infrastructure, just as Warren and Washington Counties used their bonding authority 35 years ago building the trash

incinerator. Zero Waste infrastructure costs a fraction of the cost of an incinerator and pollutes less. Move away from incineration.

- Establish a countywide food waste composting facility starting with a pilot program. (The Zero Waste Planning Committee has been collaborating with Warren County officials on moving this idea forward.)
- Develop a peer-to-peer program with cities and counties that have reached at least a 50% waste reduction and diversion goal.
- Require a comparative financial analysis of Zero Waste vs Incineration at Wheelabrator Hudson Falls so that citizens and officials can make clear decisions.

The chief way we dispose of our solid waste “garbage” now is incineration. Markets for our co-mingled recyclables are few. A Zero Waste approach is beneficial to prepare for the ultimate closure of the aging Hudson Falls incinerator, whenever that happens. Cost to haul garbage out of the area will become onerous. Wasting organic resources such as food scraps and other valuable commodities makes no sense. The good news is that better answers exist. A Zero Waste community can be achieved through action plans and measures that significantly reduce waste and pollution.

We urge our Warren County Supervisors to demand that the Local Solid Waste Plan for the next ten years reflects the promise of Zero Waste.

Submitted by the Zero Waste Planning Committee, July 14, 2020