

In The Room

BY JEFF WELD

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I recently sat in a room with around 60 of my Casella colleagues in a meeting of the Recycling, Organics, and Resource Solutions teams. The people in the room represented about one-tenth of the more than 500 people who work in those three lines of businesses, which are tasked with finding a higher and better use for what has traditionally ended up in our waste streams. They are Casella's fastest-growing lines of business and represent customers in more than 40 states cutting across residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional population segments.

Part of the exercise that day was to tell the group how long we had been with the company. The experience with the company represented in that room exceeded 650 total years and ranged from less than a month to over 30 years. Total years of industry experience no doubt well exceeded those numbers. I knew I was surrounded by talent, but this really brought it home for me.

Through their tireless efforts, Casella has helped countless customers move closer to their zero waste goals. For example, Hypertherm in Lebanon, N.H. has achieved greater than 98 percent zero waste, sending just 1.8% of their waste stream to landfill, through their work with Casella. Dozens of colleges, universities, and healthcare facilities, including several in New Hampshire, rely on Casella to help them exceed their sustainability goals year after year and more than 150 municipalities throughout New Hampshire are served by the company. Recently, Casella was featured on a nationally televised program as one of the only companies in the industry that has made recycling both economically and environmentally sustainable in an ever-challenging global marketplace. Casella has also signed on as a non-exporter of residential plastics, with our employees committing themselves to find domestic markets for recycling commodities. Why? Because it is the right thing to do, even though it was certainly not the easiest.

To say these people are the experts in the room for any zero waste or resource management discussion is an understatement. That is if they are allowed to be in the room.

Recently, an invitation to a "Zero Waste Summit" came across my email inbox thanks to an excited customer who passed it along because she had recently been working with Casella to bring what she considered a similar discussion to her organization, where the company was already involved in helping them achieve their sustainability goals. In her mind, she was making a logical connection that she hoped would help the state of New Hampshire come up with a real solution to its waste and recycling capacity issues. It is exactly the kind of thing we have in mind when we mention "Teamwork" as a part of our Core Values—we're more effective when we work together. In our view, this was surely an opportunity to do just that.

After I responded that Casella would absolutely love to bring our human and financial capital to the table for discussion—offering engineers, sustainability experts, and any others who might fit into the discussion—I was told by the organizers in no uncertain terms that we were not welcome.

How could it be that a company that has operated in the waste and resource management industry for nearly five decades, a company that built the first-ever recycling facility in the state of Vermont, and a

company that has customers in more than 40 states working on eliminating waste from their packaging, their processes, and their customers' lives would not be welcome at a meeting where the goal was to "achieve zero waste for New Hampshire's North Country?"

The answer to that question is for you, the readers to determine, but I offer this as a possibility; the groups who were invited to the table to participate in the discussion all have one thing in common: They seek to eliminate landfill operations in their towns or regions. Perhaps they didn't really want to seek a solution to New Hampshire's waste issues, to explore real solutions that help New Hampshire residents achieve zero waste, but only wished to come up with new, unsubstantiated, and fear-based rhetoric to further their agenda regardless of how much it ends up costing taxpayers and residents in the long run. I guess I won't ever know what their true motives are for the people of New Hampshire after being unceremoniously disinvited by a representative from meeting organizer Toxics Action Center, a Massachusetts-based activist group.

Yes, in addition to the lines of business I mentioned previously, Casella also operates landfills throughout the northeast. All of Casella's landfills, including the one located in Bethlehem, are highly regulated, extensively engineered, relentlessly permitted and play an important role in how our society currently manages the waste it produces. These facilities are an important bridge to the future as we make progress towards conservation, renewal, and regeneration of resources. Pretending they should not exist, or that their capacity should not be increased to continue operation is an emotional response to a complex problem. It is not based in reality, and if you consider what our new reality would look like without these facilities it becomes pretty dire and very costly both economically and environmentally.

I applaud the efforts of Rep. Karen Ebel and her New Hampshire legislative committee that studied the waste and recycling issues in their state. The committee is seeking real solutions to a disposal capacity challenge compounded by a lack of in-state recycling infrastructure. The committee invited a diverse group of people to their table, had the difficult discussions, and proposed realistic next steps. Challenges such as these require complex solutions. The people who come to work at Casella every day are poised to meet those challenges head-on, to provide creative, attainable solutions, and to do so in a manner that brings resources to the table to help develop the recycling and disposal infrastructure to provide this necessary service for the people of New Hampshire.

Yes, the depth and breadth of knowledge that my colleagues brought to the room that day was inspiring and represented just a fraction of the human resources Casella brings to every challenge when approaching solutions for managing waste each day. They do not profess to have all the answers, just a desire to collaborate with others to find the answers, and to not quit until they do just that.

But only if they are allowed in the room.

Jeff Weld is director of Community Engagement for Casella Waste Systems, Inc.