

Editorial: Out of sight, not out of mind

Mount Desert Islander

January 18, 2019

<https://www.mdislander.com/opinions/editorial-out-of-sight-not-out-of-mind>

Everyone will be glad when we reach the end of the current fraught debates over the handling of our municipal trash and recycling. But the prevalence of waste management in the public eye in the last couple of years has silver linings. It has improved residents' working knowledge of the science, economics and policy involved. And it has helped underscore that "there is no away" when we think we're "throwing away" unwanted materials.

In the last couple of years, Mount Desert Island towns have debated "pay-as-you-throw" proposals; whether to sign on to send trash to Fiberight to be made into biofuels; how to keep up with changes in the market for recycled material or whether to offer municipal recycling at all and whether to ban carryout plastic bags and polystyrene containers.

Each of these issues has served to keep waste management in the limelight and has educated the public in a compelling way, because money is on the table.

Nearly 40 years ago, just before the first Earth Day, John Javna of The EarthWorks Group published a book called "50 Simple Things You Can Do To Save The Earth." The book was a phenomenon and sold five million copies.

In the years since, Javna told GreenBiz in 2008, he found himself becoming cynical about the approach the book had helped popularize.

"I just thought, this is not solving problems, and in some ways it's even creating problems because people think that they're addressing an issue in a deep way when they're just skimming the surface," he said. "You could say that that book was a mile wide and an inch deep. It turned out that there weren't 50 simple things we can do to save the earth — just a half-dozen or so rather difficult ones."

When his 14-year old daughter asked him why they had stopped composting in their house, he said, a light bulb went off. "I made a decision that I couldn't really afford to be cynical," he said. "Not if I love my children." With the help of his daughters, he created a new version of the book in 2008.

Javna's internal debate mirrors much of the conversation about plastic bag bans and other waste and pollution issues: How to weigh whether a policy is a "feel good" measure or one that will create positive change. How to reduce the chances of negative, unintended consequences. How to balance costs and benefits.

The questions aren't going anywhere. But MDI is fortunate to have municipal officials, activists and voters who are committed to continuous learning and moving in the right direction.