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NEW SOLUTIONS FOR WASTE WOES

By **Lynn Pledger**/special to the TAB
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You're at the check-out line. The shopper in front of you has mounded her cart with cheap disposables. You think, "I wouldn't pay for that junk." But you *are* paying for it. Within days most of the items in that cart may be out at the curb, awaiting garbage collection and disposal supported by your tax dollars.

For Newton trash, the next stop will be the incinerator. The health care costs related to incineration are hard to calculate. Although incinerators are regulated by the government (add more tax dollars), research shows that incinerators emit *nano* particles (ultra fines) that are not captured by air pollution control devices, travel long distances, penetrate deep into the lungs, and carry neurotoxic metals into the brain.

And how would you put a dollar figure on the global warming impact of the trash-waiting-to-happen in that shopping cart? According to EPA figures, 38% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the provision of goods and services. Incinerators emit more C02 per megawatt hour than coal-fired, natural-gas fired, or oil fired power plants. Our production/disposal cycle in the U.S. has accelerated to the point that we're throwing away approximately twice the weight of products and packaging per capita as we did in 1960.

But what about waste-to-energy incineration? Isn't that energy recovery a plus? No, what you get out of the 5250 Btus in a pound of garbage, in addition to pollution, is less than 1,000 Btus recovered by incineration. Recycling saves three to five times more energy; that's the energy saved by using recycled feedstock, instead of harvesting and processing virgin materials. And if your concerned about the depletion of natural resources, consider that for every ton of products produced there are approximately 71 tons of industrial wastes that the consumer never sees. Garbage is not renewable energy.

That's the bad news. The good news, according to Massachusetts waste activists, is that there are solutions to these problems, strategies known collectively as Zero Waste. This planning approach addresses not only the quantity of waste, but also its toxicity, its contribution to climate change, and its link to corporate responsibility. Zero Waste includes waste reduction, reuse, full recycling, composting, and EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility).

But is "zero" a realistic goal? Advocates explain that a goal of zero sharpens planning efforts in the same way that "zero accidents" or "zero defects" are targets used by industry.

Of all the Zero Waste component, EPR may hold the most promise, not only for reducing waste but also for changing the kinds of products available to the consumer. The EPR concept holds brand-owners responsible for "cradle to cradle" management of their discarded products. An example of EPR is the refillable beverage bottle.

“EPR prevents waste by design rather than manage it after the fact,” says Bill Sheehan, Director of Product Policy Institute. “Examples of waste-reducing design are a toothpaste tube designed to stand upright on a store shelf without a box, or an appliance designed for easy repair.”

In a Zero Waste future, returning products for reuse, repair, or recycling would be as easy as shopping. Through EPR legislation and regulation, brand-owners would assume the cost of recovery and safe recycling of their products and that cost would be internalized in the price of the product. As a result, the price of “disposables” and toxic or non-repairable items would reflect their true social and environmental cost, and the market would respond accordingly. On the other hand, products that are durable, repairable, compostable, or reyclclable would be easier for brand owners to channel back into the marketplace or the environment, and that fact would be reflected in a lower retail price.

The shopping cart of cheap disposables with a myriad of hidden social and environmental costs would become a thing of the past.

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