

The Ridge Runner

by Al Fritsch, S.J.

Ideas On Solid Waste

About 10 years ago I was riding Amtrak from New York and noticed an obviously foreign couple constantly pointing out the window and speaking gravely to each other. I looked and saw -- litter. Unfortunately the age of environmental consciousness has not slowed visual pollution in all its forms. Garbage is now as American as apple pie. Into the waste bins each year goes one-third our national consumption of major materials and the energy equivalent of one-tenth of our annual consumption. The average citizen discards five pounds of garbage a day or an astounding one ton per year. We consume much and discard quickly.

Is it necessary to recount the problems associated with solid wastes? They include high disposal costs, few resource recovery opportunities, lack of suitable locations for sanitary landfills, threatened loss of good drinking water, reduced tourism potential, and the serious health and safety consequences of illegal dumping.

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The scope of these problems hit Livingston earlier this summer when residents challenged the planned landfill -- to be built above the municipal water system. The massive problems associated with heavy volumes of solid waste were suddenly thrust upon this small community, and it became obvious that neither the community nor the county could even begin to solve the problems that society as a whole had established.

In the face of corporate efforts aimed at having us consumers dispose of everything from watches to razors, our small conservation measures (composting, sorting, recycling, omitting paper sacks when shopping, etc.) seem futile. That Native American with the tear in his eye in the "Keep America Beautiful" ads is really keeping a beverage industry profitable -- by using less distributing facilities and shifting the responsibility for disposables to users.

In some ways, we are all to blame for letting industry, regulators and careless people get away with littering. But a number of citizen actions can be undertaken to reinsert responsibility back into the waste disposal procedure:

- * Follow solid waste management planning procedures in your community. At the proper time, petition for a public hearing to discuss the local plan. Make this an educational opportunity for citizens and help gather and provide information to the media. When the

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