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CASE STUDY ASHBURTON

A BEST PRACTISE WASTE MINIMISATION COUNCIL CONTRACT WITH A COMMUNITY GROUP

INTRODUCTION

For ten years, Wastebusters has worked with Ashburton District Council in the area of waste reduction, successfully achieving the needs of the Council and District in the on-going management of the area's waste.

Wastebusters Trust Canterbury (formerly Mid- Canterbury Wastebusters) is a Community Trust based at Ashburton, currently contracting to three different Councils, with 5 different Council contracts. They employ approximately 15 FTE employees and turn over nearly a million dollars.

Although it was generally agreed that this liaison hasn't always been a happy one, with persistence and goodwill an excellent relationship has evolved. Quite a difficult start has evolved into a good partnership.

What has made this alliance so successful and what can other districts learn from this?

KEY INGREDIENTS

1. Personnel – The initiators of Wastebusters, Sheryl Stivens and Anita Coghill, both strong advocates for community and for waste minimisation, are seen as critical and pivotal in starting this whole process off. The Council staff e.g. Rob Rouse, and Councillors who have steered their Council's way through this, must also take credit for their part in the partnership.

2. Persistence - the community initiators were persistent in sharing their goals with the Council and gradually waste minimisation became the accepted precept.

3. Patience - it took a number of years of tension between ideals and a business model for a working partnership to evolve.

4. Education was the starting point - Councillors soon had their own family members preaching the gospel via the schools programme.

5. Responsibility for the full resource cycle - Acceptance by the Council that they have some responsibilities for the whole cycle – not just for removing waste from the kerb-side. The Council has control of the waste stream.

6. A strong sense of community - Community ties are strong in the District, so the development of Wastebusters has been an extension of the natural involvement and cooperation that exists already, leading to –

7. A growing sense of community - Illustrated by

- Council and community recognition of the people who work for the environment- e.g. the Totara award, and recognition of the schools' work within the community.
- The responses of outlying communities to waste problems, involving the community working together with a background of the education that has been running in the locality for 10 years now. In small communities peer pressure is a factor.
- A dynamic business community gives good support at governance level and good support and cooperation from the business sector.
- New initiatives such as the recent putrescible wastes trial came from within the community, and were not perceived as imposed by the Council.

8. A positive local media - tells the good as well as the bad stories. Working constructively with the media has helped promote the good stories and the successes of the partnerships.

9. Celebrating success - such as receiving the Supreme Zero Waste award - celebrating the partnership allows it to rise above the constituent parts and embrace the whole community.

10 The inclusion of social agendas in the operation has led to the employment of individuals from marginalised groups, although recent lack of support from Government departments has made this a threatened activity.

THE RESULT

The result of this is that the providers of the contract services (Wastebusters Trust and staff) are well respected for their:

- Track record
- Working relationships
- High output
- Reliability
- Commitment
- Enthusiasm

Over time, this has seen the development of a local contractor from within the community. This operation is locally “owned”, and it draws its employees from within the local community, and recycles a significant amount of money within the district. The payout is in terms of contracts to local engineers, local cartage firms, and wages to employees which are basically spent in the local community. Profits could also be measured in other ways, such as the cleaner environment and the future sustainability resulting from the measures now in place.

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COMPARISON BETWEEN COMMUNITY GROUP AND A COMMERCIAL CONTRACTOR

In general, it is understood that a commercial contractor is driven primarily by the 'bottom line'. In comparison, the community group drivers are: a concern for the future, the well-being and sustainability of their local environment. And a concern for the welfare of marginalised people in their community. As a consequence, the levels of commitment and service are higher with a community group operation.

A commercial company needs certainty, so they can resource the contract with some stability for the years ahead. This frequently leads to some preferential treatment such as reflection of capital costs needed in the term of the contract in order to secure the contract.

The conundrum in getting a council and community group to form a successful long term association is getting each partner (council and community group) to understand each others roles and viewpoints. The individuals come from very different standpoints. One is driven by environmental and community concerns and has an urgency to move ahead, while the council officer is governed by council policy and the need to follow the correct pathway through the necessary bureaucratic and democratic processes.

In Ashburton, an understanding of these different roles and positions took several years to develop and evolve. In addition, the vision of the two parties was differently focused - the community group took a different perspective than that initially taken by the Council and its officers.

At the same time too, the expectations and wants of the community at large are also a governing factor. Response to any change or trial may not have been so great if the public had seen a company doing this rather than a local trust.

With a commercial operator, the contract relationship is more commercial, and would operate at a greater distance from the council- so there would be less communication to and fro and it would be a solely financial transaction.

Community groups can be difficult and different to deal with, but they generally can be trusted not to take a short-cut which a financially driven organisation may have to do. They provide good value for money and do an excellent job.

Waste can be a big expenditure item in a council budget, so it needs a high level of oversight whether the contract is with a private company, or is let out to a community group.

Community groups can sometimes look outside the square. They are prepared to trial things, are elastic and will take into account factors not always appreciated by others. This flexibility gives them a great advantage, but requires a continuing liaison with all parties involved, including their community and the Council.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

When starting up it is important to do the basics well and then build on that. From the beginning, it was seen that education was essential for all involved.

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There was and is a comprehensive education programme provided to schools and community, including a telephone help-line, composting demonstrations, and an education centre open 7 days a week. Wastebusters continues to run courses for individuals wanting to learn their system.

Councillors soon had their own family members preaching the gospel. The children and grandchildren of the decision makers were taught in the local schools, and were soon bringing the message home.

After 10 years, members of the community now feel they are an integral part of the programme and take responsibility in helping solve the problem, rather than just seeing it all as a Council problem.

This continues to be a strong part of the success of Ashburton.

The journey to zero waste revolves around shared concerns and experiences. Each year there are workshops which are open to the public which have innovative and interesting speakers to which the elected representatives and Council staff are invited.

Education on zero waste continues to be an integral part in all pre-schools and primary schools in the area. Every year there is a competition, and the schools are again challenged to have no residual waste.

Part of the rationalisation of waste services involved the introduction of 4 rural recycling depots, convenient to most, but not to everyone in the community. One of the outcomes of the education initiatives is the recent decision of an outlying community, a settlement of 55 families, to take on responsibility for their recyclables and residual rubbish themselves. This community (the Hakatere settlement) has embraced the ethos, by opting to do their own sorting and separation, and to transport the recyclables and residual waste themselves, rather than have their rates increased.

Farm families, at the insistence of their children, are increasingly sorting and recycling their waste. The recyclables are often coming back into the mainstream via the schools.

In retrospect education was an excellent starting place and it continues to be important in terms of the mature response of the ratepayers of Ashburton.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

An appointed Trustee and the CEO of the Trust meet with the Council CEO each month. This gives the opportunity to have a less formal, ongoing examination of both current issues and wider activities in the ever-changing world of waste. There is an opportunity to respond and to share ideas. This is a useful mechanism to deal with changes affecting the contracts, such as the recent glass problem.

People must know what the community group is doing and why:

“If you get quietly on with your job and no-one knows, you are doomed”

The local media has helped in this evolution, they tell the good, as well as the bad stories. Working constructively with the media has helped promote the good stories and the successes of the partnerships.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

There is the regular annual consultation, LCCP and a 2 monthly newsletter to the public from the Council. This carries waste-related news to the community.

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Further consultation is undertaken where there is change in the level of service promulgated. Wastebusters always plays a prominent role in taking a position and explaining the situation. Wastebusters' work with the business community has led to a supportive environment from the business community.

There are some continuing problems in this area which stem from the wide community role the Wastebusters play, and impact on the communication channels within the Council. See the section below **The Downsides**.

An NRB survey has shown that the community is satisfied with the waste management and collection.

HOW WAS THE CONTRACT PUT TOGETHER?

The first contact between the two parties was the delivery of educational contracts to the schools and preschools of the region. This started the process of learning to work together.

The contract for the processing of the recyclables was preceded by a transitional contract which protected the Council and the community group and allowed a period of time (6 months) to confirm quantities, staffing requirements, report forms and communication needs. This gained time to win confidence on both sides.

The problem of changing commodity prices was accommodated by costing the contract to process and dispose of various streams and did not consider the revenue from the sale of the sorted material. However as volumes are increasing so do operational costs, so there are adjustments for cost fluctuations such as hourly wage rates, which are indexed to inflation rates.

Naturally neither party wants to be exposed to extreme risk.

In the future, the council suggests, the contract should perhaps involve some strict lines of communication to try to mitigate the lobbying roles of the community group.

THE DOWNSIDES

Both sides see that at certain stages they have taken big leaps of faith.

It has taken a long time for a level of confidence to emerge.

The tension between the communications of a contractor to the appropriate council officer is disrupted and disturbed by the wider role of the community group which involves lobbying Councillors. This to some extent undermines the trust of the council officers. They feel exposed as they are "attacked" from both sides, and this prevents the relationship developing. That is why it has been suggested that the contract should perhaps involve some strict lines of communication to try to mitigate the lobbying roles of the community group. Conversely the community group often feels it is hard to have a direct voice.

Because of the high level of communication, there is an intimate knowledge of each others activities, so the community group is not treated the same as another contractor.

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Community group members taking individual stands on environmental issues can blur lines in the public mind between official group opinion and a Council contractor's stance. While the group has an official role it is also a community opinion leader role; individuals within the group can sometimes be seen by the public as representing the whole, when sometimes they are in fact expressing a personal opinion.

At times the trust between the group and the Council has been stretched, but the partnership has held. However there is acceptance by the Council that a community business enterprise can operate in a business-like way, operate a range of equipment, and deliver excellent service. Nevertheless, the community group delivers 150% and is good value for the council.

Many hours of volunteer time have been spent developing solutions for the issues facing the Ashburton District. From this drive comes the growing reputation of the district for innovation. This research and development component is generally perceived by Council and Wastebusters as lacking recognition.

Although some changes are not popular at the time, a staunch attitude and plenty of education has won the day. Difficulties frequently relate to the need for spending money now, in order to get benefits down the track.

RECENT CHANGES

Closure of the local landfills and the working with Canterbury Waste has meant the costs have become more realistic. A monthly bill to the Ashburton District Council is a regular reminder of landfill costs.

Ashburton has also joined a growing trend of Councils to put no rubbish facilities at recreational sites, and require the public to take residual and recyclables home again. This is in line with DOC policy, and seems to have been accepted with few problems by the public.

Tours offered at the waste recovery site are showing those residents who don't visit as a matter of course, that at this site you can recycle many materials including aerosol cans and egg cartons, and purchase a wide range of goods, including:

- 2 grades of compost made from the green waste for \$3.00 per bag
- a bread maker or 6 mattresses for the visiting whanau at the reuse shop
- second-hand construction materials, doors, timber
- recycled paint
- glass sand, processed from the glass collection, for the garden

These are additional services not often found within commercial company activities. Wastebusters takes the trouble to divert waste streams which are difficult and small in volume. Perhaps it is this that the community responds to - an environmental aim, a series of small quantum steps to eliminate an enormous problem. A David (the community) and Goliath (the waste stream) story, not a waste service.

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CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

- It has been difficult at times but there is now a good supportive working relationship between community and the Council.
- Some difficulties remain on both sides - that may be the nature of the beast.
- The Council needs to ensure that the Wastebusters community group continues to be enthusiastic and robust, and to balance its needs with those of the Council
- The community as a whole owns the process, the whole process.
- The interaction between Wastebusters and Council has meant there is a shared understanding of the whole system. Both partners drive change.
- Wastebusters has developed systems to answer the demands of contracting to Council.
- The Council has the support of Wastebusters.
- The community group takes a consultation and leadership role in the wider community.
- The Council is happy with the commitment, output and reliability of their contractor.
- Ashburton builds its sense of community and this reflects in the choices of the population.
- Ashburton has an international reputation for this association.

IT CAN BE DONE

This is a dynamic evolution, a working marriage, a two-pot epoxy for the community. In Ashburton's case - well mixed, and now curing.

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

The Mayor, His Worship Bede O'Malley
The Ashburton District Council CEO, Brian Lester
Deputy Mayor, John Leadley
Councillor Bev. Tasker
Council Engineer Rob Rouse
Recycling Officer Tammara Page
General Manager, Wastebusters Trust Canterbury, Sheryl Stevens

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