

From Dropoffs to Convenience Centers —Rural Northeast Indiana

The Northeast Indiana Solid Waste Management District (NISWMD) is a multi-county regional special use district created in 1990. NISWMD consists of four contiguous counties of Dekalb, Lagrange, Noble, and Steuben. The district is 61% rural and 39% urban, with a total population of 156,000 and a population density of 106 people per square mile. While NISWMD does not have a final disposal facility within its jurisdiction, it is surrounded by five regional landfills with substantial approved disposal capacity. Located in the rolling lakes country of Northeast Indiana, the district encompasses 1,468 square miles.

One of the first flagship programs NISWMD established when created was a rural recycling drop off program. In the early years it ran its own servicing crew and small MRF to collect, bale, and market the material. It wasn't very many years after startup (1991) that budget became an issue (1995–96).

The district privatized the program, including materials processing, and sold off the MRE. The program continues to operate under contract with a private service provider today.

This program evolved like many across the country in that the number (about 25) of dropoffs decreased, with those remaining growing larger in footprint and number of containers. During this time, the dropoffs evolved from an open-sided small building, (with bins) serviced by a special trailer and labor intensive, to 8-cubic-yard, rear-load containers for a few short years, to finally 8-yard, front-load containers. The number of dropoffs is now 17 spread out across the four rural counties with as many as a dozen of the front-load, 8-yard containers at any given site.

NISWMD operates a very popular yard waste composting program through state-registered composting facilities (five in all), as well as grinding services to as many as eight different cities or towns. Many of the dropoffs were forced to move to municipal property when they grew in size and level of activity, or were migrated to the compost sites.

The sites have become quite popular as users of the facilities are asking for more comprehensive services such as wanting to drop off electronics: “Where can I take this TV?” and “What can I do with this old mattress or this old couch?”, for example.

The other driver pushing change in rural programs to more comprehensive services through convenience centers is the fact that the rural setting handles a lot of bulky waste, electronics, and yard waste through open dumping. In the ongoing public versus private debate, it's important to point out curbside technology does not address things like electronics and bulky waste. Couple that with significantly less dense population and material to handle in the rural setting, along with Americans' appetite for convenience, and it creates the challenge for local programs to figure out how to meet the need, and pay for it.

The reality for rural solid waste programs is we all handle bulky waste, either legitimately or through roadside dumping. It is expensive for private sector service providers to send a crew to pick up couches, mattresses, and the like. The overwhelming amount of electronics that plays such a key role in the “evolving ton” as it were, I

think are also factors contributing to the metamorphosis of the rural recycling dropoff, to the more comprehensive solid waste service convenience center.

NISWMD currently operates the Lagrange Convenience Center and is designing a Steuben Convenience Center at the Compost/Recyclables Dropoff site owned by the district. The Lagrange Convenience Center site is owned by Lagrange County and operated by the district through Inter-local Agreement. The Lagrange Convenience Center serves the far northwest quadrant of the NISWMD, while the Steuben Center is northeast. The district's Ashley Office/Shop complex serves as the southeast location historically housing yard waste composting, recyclables dropoff, and once a week household hazardous waste dropoff as well. The remaining southwest quadrant has a recently achieved approval from the state as a registered yard waste composting facility. The southwest location in the city of Kendallville is our remaining example of this evolution to convenience centers.

The district, in partnership with the city, is restoring a brownfield strategically located within the city that is well suited for composting yard waste. The recycling dropoff, located at the city street department for years, will soon be a little too close to a newly built elementary school. To avoid blowing material on windy days, increasing the level of maintenance and effort at this now more sensitive location, it makes sense to locate it with the yard waste composting operation. Users travel to the same location to dropoff yard waste, recyclables, pick up finished compost, and mulch, or just visit with neighbors to talk politics, thus the convenience. I would anticipate with time and additional improvements, other services will be added at the Kendallville location as well.

The NISWMD is a good example of our rural nature here at “The Crossroads of America.” The city of Auburn (population approximately 12,000) is located just north of Fort Wayne, the second largest city in the state and just south beyond our border. Contrast that with the Mennonite/Amish community in Lagrange County. The town of Shipshewana, for example, is known nationally for its Amish culture, wonderful cooking, and craftsmanship. The Solid Waste Convenience Center has evolved into a key strategy in Northeast Indiana to meet the needs of such diversity across our communities and culture. The “one bag per month” generator we know relies heavily on all of the district's programs and services as they repeatedly tell us. NISWMD has municipal curbside collection in five of our larger cities and towns. The convenience center and, of course, the standalone recyclables drop off continue to complement curbside collection programs.

There is general agreement we are experiencing unprecedented change in our culture and in our industry. The Solid Waste Convenience Center has become an evolving strategy by which the NISWMD is able to embrace change, and meet the challenges of resource management in the rural setting. **MSW**

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